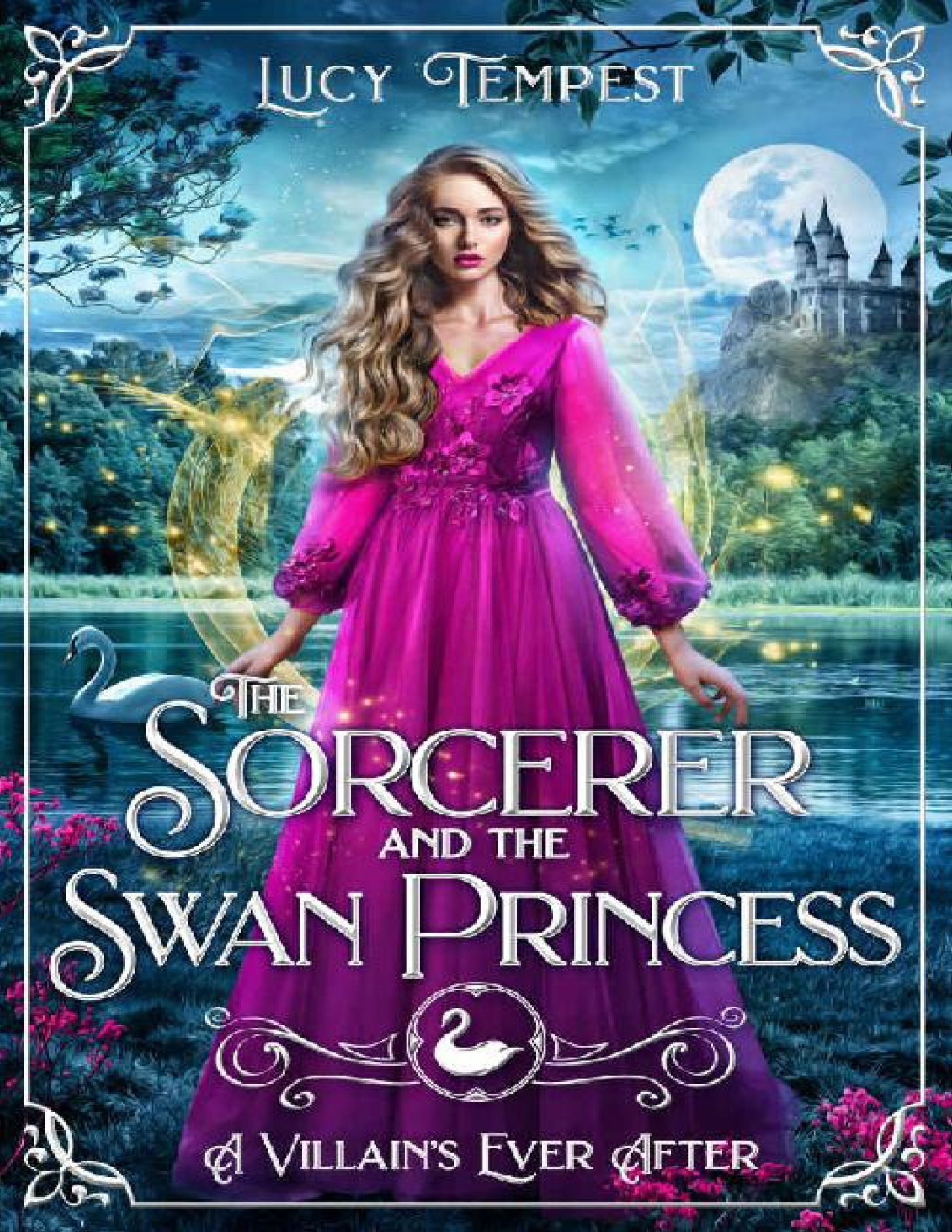
Lucy Tempest
The Sorcerer and the Swan Princess
A Villain's Ever After

THE SORCERER AND THE SWAN PRINCESS

LUCY TEMPEST

THE SORCERER AND THE SWAN PRINCESS

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The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

*To my fellow **A Villain's Ever After** authors,*

Thank you for all the fun, support and great company, especially during the time we wrote our stories in.

Can't wait to see what the future holds for us all!

“And yet I have had the weakness, and have still the weakness, to wish you to know with what a sudden mastery you kindled me, heap of ashes that I am, into fire.”

— A TALE OF TWO CITIES, CHARLES DICKENS

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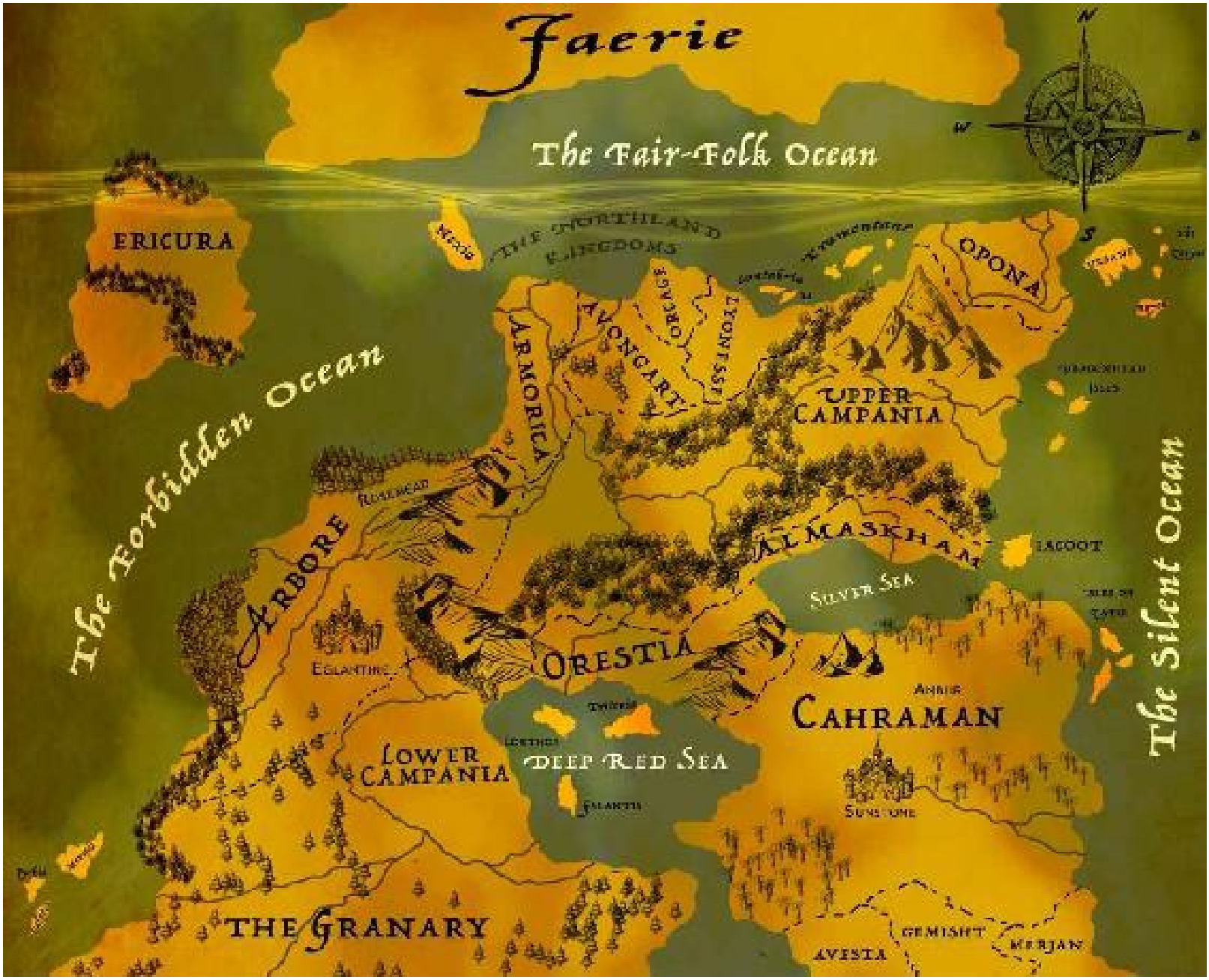
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CHAPTER ONE

Tempting fate was not something I was in the habit of doing.

But here I was, in my old ballet shoes, gripping the bar and biting my lip as I tried to rise en pointe.

It had been two years since I had last danced in public—or at all for that matter. It was something I wasn't physically or emotionally prepared to do again. But there was no excuse in the world that could keep me out of the ballroom now.

This weekend was my and my sister's twenty-first birthday, and the day I'd formally be confirmed as Opona's crown princess. That meant I had to greet nobility and entertain foreign royalty, and possibly, hopefully, find the man I'd marry.

Most of my socializing could not be done sitting down, or even standing up. I had to stroll alongside the women and dance with the men who sought my attention. With every eye on me on my big day, it would be horrifying if my ankle wobbled at the wrong time, dumping me into a humiliating pile of silk and chiffon topped with an askew tiara.

I'd had such a disastrous if unwitnessed spill when I'd tried to dance months after tearing a ligament in my knee and breaking my ankle. Even now, long after they'd supposedly healed, they retained an inflexible weakness that made even walking in heeled shoes a worrisome task.

Huffing out a long, hot breath, I faced my reflection, favoring my left uninjured foot, and tried to steady my shaking legs. It was hard to tell if the tremor came from lack of practice or anxiety, but I needed to get a grip on both fast.

Arcing an arm over my head and lifting my bad leg up to the side, I tried to distract myself into remaining balanced by scrutinizing my face.

I had inherited Father's hard bone structure, a combination of a wide jaw, strong chin and firm, sloping nose, which my sister and I had been told was "striking." The softer features were Mother's full, sculpted lips and wavy tresses, but our hair color was a cross between her golden blonde and Father's chestnut brown. Last was the color of our eyes. Both our parents were blue-eyed, so, reportedly, we inherited that mossy shade of green from our great-grandmother, Irena, who came from the mountains of Orestia.

But the trait that eluded tracing back to any relative was my two front teeth. Peeking through my lips, especially when I smiled, they were a sure way to tell Lina and me apart.

It was a difference she never let me forget about. I couldn't chide her attitude without being smacked with a retort about my "beaver teeth."

As for the similarities that could easily become differences, Lina had frequently bemoaned our "bland" hair color and expressed her desire to dye hers black to bring out her eyes.

Father had forbidden her from touching her hair.

In true Lina fashion, she'd responded by dressing primarily in black, like she was in mourning. She'd tried to cajole me into joining her "protest," but I had much bigger problems to occupy myself with than such contrived causes.

Unfortunately, Lina saw this as taking our father's side, and proceeded to retaliate for my presumed betrayal. She always found new reasons to aggravate and antagonize me.

Irritation wormed its way back through me, further stiffening my muscles. I exhaled again, lowering my leg as I moved away from the mirror, and performed a slow string of steps, testing my mobility.

The door slammed open, startling me off my rhythm.

At glimpsing the intruder in the reflection, I curbed my automatic urge to become presentable, and continued warming up.

"Aren't you a little too old for that ballet nonsense, Ava?" was Lina's sneered greeting. "I thought you were thankfully forced to give it up."

Stifling a groan, I ignored her, speeding up my shifts from one move to another, staying close to the bar in case I needed its steadying intervention.

Lina hustled closer to me, looking like a witch who'd just been kicked out of her coven with her sour face, flowing black dress and severe bun set with a carved-bone comb. "I'm talking to you."

"Was that you, Lina? I thought it was the restless ghost of Mistress Agrafina, doomed to forever haunt the room where we disappointed her," I snarked, rising back en pointe, body ramrod straight, arms arabesque. "You sure provided her with a lot of unfinished business."

It was one thing to see my face doubled in the reflection, but another to see its duplicate glaring back at me, set with an expression I would never wear in public—or at all, for that matter. Lina's perpetual displeasure and tendency to dress in the most disruptive styles ever to grace our court were what *now* made people tell us apart. Before she'd taken to spiting our father, we'd been almost interchangeable.

"It's not my fault the old bat was a terrible teacher." Lina crossed her arms, scowling at the polished-wood floor, as if remembering her defiance-filled sessions there. "She had it in for me, when she should have been honored to teach not one but two princesses!"

I did my best to mirror her glare. "The honor was ours, Lina. Agrafina Rostova was the prima ballerina of her generation, and she agreed to come out of retirement to teach us."

"So we could dance in *our* Royal Opera House. It was about us, but she made it about her own precious time and reputation. She made up excuses to boss us around in front of the other girls."

"That was her job, in order to make us the best, in hopes we could succeed her in the performances only she could tackle." I twirled around to face her, but my attempt to do so fluidly failed, since the ever-present ache in my ankle had gone from the tolerable stretch of exercise to the warning flare of possible damage. Thanks to the added tension of her presence. I gulped down a groan of pain. "It wasn't her fault you were needlessly difficult."

Offense tightened her features. "Difficult? She was a slave driver and singled me out."

"Because you were the most gifted of the twenty-four of us and you refused to apply yourself! She said several times that you had a potential we all had to work twice as hard to emulate—and you squandered it by quitting so early."

"Whatever you say, Your Highness," she said snidely. "Your word is law."

So that's what this was about?

"Aren't *you* a little too old for this needless antagonism?" I snapped.

"I'm not antagonistic," Lina hissed back, her nose in the air. "Everyone treats you better than me just because by some stroke of luck you came out of Mother first!"

Exhaling through my nostrils, I unclenched my jaw. "How people react to me has nothing to do with me being the heir, but with you having a horrid personality!"

"Oh, so you're telling me if our birth order was swapped, people would be rude to their future queen, hmm? As if anyone would risk that."

This was the umpteenth time she'd suckered me into this argument, acting like the entire world was against her and viewed her as lesser than me because she was "The Spare."

"They might grin and bear it, but they don't have to with me because I don't make mountains out of molehills. I communicate my complaints courteously and professionally, and find ways to solve them quickly and quietly." I winced at another twinge in my ankle, my patience evaporating with the zap. "What do you even want now, anyway?"

Suddenly avoiding my eyes, she walked around me. "Just wanted to know what you'll wear tomorrow, and how you'll be doing your hair."

"Why?"

"So I can style myself as differently as possible, of course," Lina said off-handedly. "Can't have people thinking I'm you."

I groaned, channeling the irritation through that rumbling noise. "I'm wearing the white dress with the feathery overskirt, and my hair won't be loose, so *you* can give your scalp a break from those buns."

Frowning, her hand shot up to her bun. "What's wrong with them?"

"They're clearly too tight. They'll give you bald spots."

Lina let out a ridiculing laugh. "Wouldn't you like that, Ava? Some deficiency on *my* part to help tell us apart?" I opened my mouth to retort but she cut me off with a hurried gesture at my head. "So, how exactly is Her Highness wearing her hair? You know, to make sure I can take a break from shifting my hairline."

"Since when are you so detail-oriented?"

She grinned at me, a sight more off-putting than her glower. "Since now."

Whatever got her to leave me alone faster. "A low chignon, to leave space for my tiara. There, you happy?"

"No."

My heat shot up a notch further.

Deciding the mindset I had to be in to dance had evaporated., and my practice was ruined, I bent to unwrap my shoe straps. "You're never happy."

When I straightened, she was gone.

What was that all about?

CHAPTER TWO

Smoothing imaginary wrinkles on my gown, I breathed out my stiffness. The layers of rich materials were arranged like the feathers on a waterbird's body, with the billowy sleeves invoking its wings. My shoes were flat to help avoid any trouble.

As I took in another calming breath, the double doors swung open, bathing me in light and baring me to the crowd that awaited in the great hall.

Exhaling as I was announced, I emerged, facing ahead as I took the path the gold-lined blue velvet carpet set for me, and did my best to ignore the hundreds of eyes watching me.

When I finally reached the podium where my father and the high priest awaited me, I set my right foot on its bottom step, and my ankle twisted. Not enough to tip my foot sideways, but enough to make me wobble.

To cover the uncoordinated move, I dipped into a curtsey, bowing my head to each before straightening, schooling my face into regal neutrality as I smothered the nerves. One wrong move here would be fodder for jokes that would circulate for years into my reign. That was how long my grandfather, King Borislav had been made fun of, after he'd slipped and landed on his teeth during his coronation.

"Princess Aventina, do you swear to honor your role as heir to Opona by protecting its people?" asked the high priest, holding a golden scepter bearing a swan pommel.

"I do," I said tightly, realizing I had been barely breathing.

"Do you swear to uphold their laws and rights?"

I took the scepter, raising it to show to the crowd behind me. "I do."

My father approached, the glimmering *kokoshnik* tiara in his hands, its white gold and diamonds standing out against his deep-purple robes. "Do you swear to represent us to foreign powers as a strong and admirable leader?"

"I do."

"Kneel," he ordered.

Swallowing, I carefully lowered myself, tucking my leg behind me in more of a deep curtsey than a kneel. No one would be able to tell, as it was all under my gown.

Father placed the tiara on my head, mumbling for my ears only, "Ava, breathe" before raising his hands to announce loudly, "Rise, Grand Duchess Aventina."

Rising up, I swept around in a thankfully smooth turn. I looked down at all present as they broke out in applause, letting my gaze drag across the many faces with a serene smile until I spotted Lina

standing at the very back. She was in a pitch-black cloak and hat, covering everything but her face.

The nerve of her, treating my ceremony as a funeral.

A stranger sight than her mourner's outfit was the man right next to her. Dressed in nut-brown hooded robes like a monk, hands tucked deep within their large sleeves, head lowered towards her as they spoke, I couldn't begin to guess who he was or which party he belonged to.

Next second, I forgot all about him. Someone was passing through the crowd, heading to the front. Like a lantern in the woods, he was all I saw, all I wanted to follow.

His ensemble was all white—fitted pantaloons tucked into satiny cloth boots, tunic adorned with silvery thread in leaf-like patterns, and padded shoulders from which an embroidered cape flowed. Against all this whiteness, his dark hair stood out in a crown of tousled waves, and his tan face was striking. It was separated into perfect thirds by the line of straight brows above charcoal eyes, and the measured space between his sharp nose and slim mouth.

There was only one kind of person who could afford such an ensemble, who parted crowds with such assurance and entitlement: a prince.

Even if he wasn't, he had to at least be one of the foreign dignitaries here to witness my confirmation as future queen. And with that deal sealed, I needed to set about finding my consort…

He smiled at me, and I felt my heart being pierced with an arrow.

Struggling not to exhibit any reaction, I descended from my podium on shaking legs, signaling for the crowd to disperse and busy themselves. The orchestra picked the music back up, offsetting the chatter and prompting many to dance.

Courtiers fawned over me and foreign representatives offered congratulations, but I barely saw or heard them, my senses caught by the dark eyes that followed my every move. I kept an eye on him too as I swanned about, automatically doling out rehearsed pleasantries.

Father soon fell into step beside me, and I had to ask, "Who is that?"

Without me pointing out who I meant, Father replied at once, "Prince Siegfried of Lyonesse."

Recognition wrung a gasp from me. "King Ludwig's son? I haven't seen or heard of him in years."

Father nodded, his eyes following mine to fix on the prince. "Yes, he's been away at some academy in Avongart, I believe. An unusual choice for a future king."

That reminded me he was the king's firstborn, making my hopes dwindle and disappear. "Oh, so he isn't here for me."

"He's here alone, so it must be as his father's representative. So yes, he is here for you."

Tapping my scepter into my open palm, I sighed heavily. "Yes, but as an heir himself, he can't entertain the idea of pursuing me. He'd need someone he outranks."

Someone like Lina.

The thought of him aiming that level of attention at anyone else, especially her, made me bristle.

Father shrugged. "Whether an arrangement can be made, you have to find out for yourself."

"How can one be? An arrangement would mean abdication, and I was just confirmed as heir." Worry solidified the idea that he was here for Lina, the one daughter King Ilya of Opona could part with. "Oh, dear. I haven't considered the suitors who could truly be available to me."

Father gave me a knowing look, extending his hand out. "That's what tonight is for. Go, talk, get to know those who will serve and deal with you once you're queen, and see what your options are."

Handing him the scepter, I wiped my sweaty palms down the gossamer layers of my skirt and moved into the crowd.

I talked to many, including ministers and their sons, young lords who had come with their families, even dukes from other nations, but none held my interest. Only Siegfried did.

And every time I looked for him, I found him looking right back at me.

Torn between resisting and pursuing, I looked away to find Lina leaving with the monk.

What? Was she going to get back at father for not splitting the throne between us as she once suggested by becoming a priestess?

Curious, I followed them out of the ballroom and onto the balcony. But between one moment and the next, they vanished from my line of sight.

Tense and confused, I turned around, and almost bumped into Siegfried.

"Excuse me!" I jumped back. My tiara fell off my head, and he caught it before I could finish my horrified gasp. "Oh, dear."

"Here," he said, gaze tinged with amusement as he set the tiara back on my head. "You don't want to lose this."

"Thank you," I breathed unevenly. "That would have been disastrous."

He bowed to me. "My pleasure, Ava."

I did a double take at the name. "Ava?"

"Or would you prefer Grand Duchess Aventina?" he asked with a playful wink that made my heart flutter.

"Not between us, Siggy."

His smile grew, delight dancing in his dark eyes. "So you do remember me? I was hoping you would."

To be honest, I didn't remember much aside from that we'd played together a handful of times as children, when our families visited each other's courts. He had always gotten us in trouble with our minders, convincing me to do things I'd never consider on my own.

A simpler time.

"Did you come here for me?" I asked jokingly.

To my surprise, he said, "As a matter of fact, I did."

"Oh? How come?"

"Came to see if your eyes were still taking up half your face," he said mock-solemnly.

Scoffing, I gave him a soft shove. "I see you've grown into your ears."

"They may seem smaller, but they hear everything just as well." He held out his hand. "Because we'll be catching up for a while, and I want to hear everything that's happened since we last met."

Buzzing with nostalgia that unearthed old fondness and new sensations at his presence, I set my hand in his. I had to keep the buzz from turning into a shudder when he bent to kiss it.

"May I have this dance?"

"You may."

Siegfried led me back inside, and with a twirl I was pulled in, one hand in his and the other on his shoulder as we began to dance.

"So, tell me everything I've missed," he said, his focus on my eyes unwavering. "And everything you're planning to do from now on."

Now was not the time to talk aspirations for the realm, my continued education as future ruler, and all the political and judicial tasks I would be a part of.

"I'd like to forget about that for now and talk about something a little more personal," I said, swaying to the energetic string section. "Where have you been? I haven't heard anything about you in ages."

"School, mostly." He stepped back to twirl me out, and I felt my right ankle pop and my stress spiked. "As for why you haven't heard of me until now, you can blame my old man."

"How is King Ludwig?"

He made a displeased face. "Difficult, and going senile."

"No!" I whispered in disbelief. "How are you sure?"

His frown deepened. "Because he's just passed me over for Alberich. His delusions have him convinced that I am not fit for the throne, and that my brother—a literal child—is."

My jaw dropped. "He stripped you of your birthright? Why?"

"I told you, he's unreasonable and unaware of it. But no one can say a word against him as the king." He looked down, eyes shadowed by his hair, shoulders slumped. "I must accept this and hope the best for Alberich when our father passes, which should be soon, given his age and health."

My first thought should have been that this was a great injustice done to him, but it only gave me a rush of hopeful excitement.

Being passed over for his brother meant that he was free to do what heirs could not.

Like be the consort of a queen.

"Your father's reign will continue for much longer, since your grandfather and great-grandfather were long-lived," I assured him. "I'm sure Alberich will become a man, be prepared, during that time."

He smiled at me. "I hope so, for his sake. Now that's settled for him, I have to decide what to do with myself."

"You could stay here," I suggested a little too eagerly. "While you figure that out."

He pulled me back in, his tone lighter. "That would be a great opportunity for us to get reacquainted."

And that's just what we did. Taking the whole room in our dance, then spreading it out further into the palace, we talked nonstop about the time we'd been apart. He had a lot of stories of trouble at school, and adventures beyond it. My tales were full of complaints about strict schedules, juggling priorities, and Lina.

"My stories are so boring compared to yours," I said as we ventured out onto the grounds, past the pavilion and towards the main fountain. "I'm afraid you'll leave sooner than I hoped because you'll find me not that interesting anymore."

He took my hand, stopping me, his gaze earnest for the first time this evening. "This talk we've had has been the best experience of the past several years for me. I feel like you understand me."

My heart fluttered like the wings of a bee, filling me with an elated flush. "We're probably the only ones who can understand each other, due to our upbringings."

"Exactly. I knew you'd be the only one who could know how I feel right now." He released my hand as we came to the circular fountain and parted. "I couldn't let them send a dignitary in my place. I had to see you."

Trying to keep calm, I strolled along my half of the fountain, peering at him through the curtain of water. "I'm glad you did. Seeing you here today has to be the best surprise."

I set my hand in the fountain, cutting through the rippling water, its silky coolness reminding me that I hadn't swum in far longer than I had danced.

A part of me wanted to climb in, see if that show of impulsivity would appeal to him. I just knew he'd follow.

But that had to wait for another day, when it wasn't such a weighty occasion, with so many foreign notables around. Once they were all gone, we could do that under the moonlight, or ride through the forest at sunrise, or take a trip to the lake at sunset.

There was so much I wanted to do now that he was here.

We reunited on the other side of the fountain with me unable to contain my smile, which he mirrored, eyes focused on me like he couldn't tear them away.

Someone called my name. I ignored it. Until they called again, and again.

As I bristled at the interruption, Siegfried put a hand on my back, and began to lead us back towards the palace. "It sounds like you're needed inside."

"Will you wait for me while I see what it is?"

He kissed my hand before stepping back. "You have me for however long you want me here."

Delight flowed within me, buoying me as we parted.

I'd go in, see what this was about, then retire for the evening. I'd then be free to have a private dinner with the only one here I truly wanted to spend time with.

The calls were coming from behind the pavilion. I approached, too caught up in the daydreams planning our time together to notice anything else.

Until someone grabbed me.

My shout was smothered by a hand, and my struggle had no effect as an invisible force gripped my whole body.

The hand released me, but the unseen hold tightened to a painful extent as I slammed to the ground, at the feet of two shrouded figures.

The much taller one had hands glowing with bright golden rays. Before I could snatch my next breath, they shot out from his fingertips towards me.

Panic blaring, my throat too tight to manage a scream, I felt the light hit me, swathe me.

Agony choked my thoughts, distorted my body, leaving no space for questions, for escape attempts, or anything but convulsive twisting and soundless screams.

When it finally let up, leaving me panting on the ground, the first thing I registered was that the figures had grown to tower over me, and that I could feel neither my fingers nor my toes.

Raising my arm, I found nothing but long, white feathers.

A wing.

Terror consumed me as I flapped around, trying and failing to rise to my feet. I *had* no feet. I had no limbs. My joints, flesh, and skin were all gone!

What is happening? What have you done to me?

My screams came out as honks, and no lips pulled back to release the desperate sounds, just a beak splitting wide open.

"You weren't joking. She really is a swan; no one would suspect otherwise."

I recognized the voice at once. Lina!

As if she'd waited until I did, she threw off her cloak to reveal a dress identical to my own, and her hat to unveil a hairstyle matching the one I wore.

The monk—*the sorcerer*—reached for me. "Did I ever give you a reason to doubt me?"

I screeched, trying to get away, flapping my arms—wings. I had wings! My body—*oh*, *what had he done to my body?*

He pulled back my wings into a firm grip and lifted me, and all I could do was paddle my short legs and webbed feet uselessly.

Bending to pick up something, Lina smirked down at me. "Thank you for doing all the hard work for me, sister. Now—it's *my* turn."

Helpless, heavily settling shock overwhelming me, all I could do was stare up at her as she slipped my tiara onto her head, and the sorcerer did something to darken my world.

CHAPTER THREE

When my consciousness returned, I didn't remember what had happened before I lost it.

For long moments, all I knew was that I had been stuffed in a bag, that I was now being dumped out into a lake, where I struggled with the alien sensations of floating on water, encompassing feathers, and a lightweight body that was missing so, so many parts.

Distress collided with fury when I saw the man who'd been handling me, and memories started crashing back. Still hidden by the hood of his cloak, the monk's outfit he'd used to infiltrate my ceremony, I realized he'd likely pretended to be accompanying the high priest. How he'd gotten away with doing this, and why—

Lina.

My last memory of her, how she'd looked, and what she'd said, hit me hard, leaving my head ringing like a bell.

What was happening?

"There you go," he said, stepping back onto the pebble beach surrounding the lake. "Until I figure out what to do with you, you'll remain here."

Rage filled every inch of my stiff, shrunken body as I screamed insults at him that emerged as hisses and honks as I splashed out after him.

Stopping to restrain my thrashing wings, before pushing me back towards the water, he laughed. "You kiss your mother with that mouth?"

He understood me?

He'd understand this even more.

Stretching out my long, narrow neck, I caught the space between his thumb and forefinger between my beak and bit down hard.

Shouting, he fell back onto the pebbles, shaking my bite off his hand, and I followed, flapping furiously, screaming at him, "What did you do to me? Make it stop!"

"I only did what your sister asked." Before I could scream more accusations and demands at him, he grabbed me and threw me back into the water.

After the shock of realizing I was not sinking, I stared bewilderedly down at the water, spellbound by what was now my reflection.

In the glittering moonlight, and disrupted only by dying out ripples was the clear image of a majestic white swan—orange beak, black mask, graceful neck and all.

It was one thing to sense this fact, but another to see it with my own eyes. All that did was make

me more furious as I splashed towards the sorcerer again, honking up a storm.

This time, there were no actual words filtering from my mind to my mouth—*my beak*—I just screamed.

"Be quiet!" He caught my beak, clamping it shut, but I flapped my wings, hoping to jab a feather into his eye. "You'll wake the children!"

Children? Was this monster holding them hostage in that castle that rose like a dark apparition behind him?

Once I pulled my face free, I knew I had to go for the throat. Perhaps his magic would wear off once he collapsed or even died!

But he didn't give me the chance. A numbing buzz encompassed my whole form as a spiral of golden light emanated from his hands and consumed me.

My bones stretched and popped, enlarging, distorting, feathers retreating into my skin with the stinging pain of a thousand paper cuts, and the rapid rearrangement of my body sparked a severe headache.

I had flown up to attack him a swan, and fallen back with a splash into the shallow edge of the lake a human.

He stood up, dusting his robes. "What was I thinking? A swan? I should have turned you into a frog." He paused and shook his head. "No. Frogs are slippery. I definitely would have lost you."

Head spinning, the fight to steady my world replacing my aggression, I croaked, "Where am I?"

Regarding me with a curious tilt to his head, he said, "You're in a lake."

"I can see that."

The feeling returned to my legs and I stood, shaky and swaying, trying to take in my surroundings. That ominous castle loomed on a small hill, overlooking the lake he'd thrown me into, what was surrounded by dense spruce trees. Lily pads covered its shallow ends, and waterbirds—mostly ducks and most of them asleep—floated about its dark water that reflected the moon in its partly cloudy sky.

We didn't have these kinds of ducks or trees in Opona. *Where was I?*

"Where am I?" I repeated out loud, panic registering, sinking in my bones.

"What difference does it make? You can't exactly walk home."

Home. I'd been ripped away from my home on the night of my ceremony. But why?

What was he going to do with me?

I had to get out of here!

Splashing through the water as I stomped out of the lake, I tried to sprint with everything I had, but the pebble beach made for an unsteady terrain.

It got the better of my weak ankle.

Wobbling painfully, it brought me down hard, spilling across the pebbles in a graceless crash, a hundred new aches spawning from the impact.

Pain overrode my focus, forcing sobs to spill from my lips. It took tremendous effort to rise to a sitting position, only to find him towering over me.

Bathing me in his shadow, his calm amusement only intensified the manic thrum of my blood flow as he murmured, "Was that meant to be your great escape?"

Grinding my teeth, I acted without thinking, flinging a pebble at his face.

It stopped inches away from his head and dropped back to the beach. "Careful. You could take someone's eye out that way."

"That's not all I want to take out."

A soft chuckle rumbled from his chest as he reached down to me. "You're making this a lot harder

on yourself."

Seeing his hand approaching reignited my fear, making me stutter, "As opposed to what? Surrendering?"

A soft "Yes" flowed from the depths of his hood.

"And why would I do that?"

"To avoid courting my fury?"

Not likely, you faceless beast!

Scrambling up, I threw myself at him.

I must have surprised him, because he stumbled back. But he only lost his balance because his foot caught on a rock behind him, and he fell. Hard. I heard a sickening crack.

Good. I hope it's his skull.

But I wasn't sticking around to find out if it was. I had to get away while he was down, and hopefully out.

Ignoring the pain stiffening my entire leg to avoid another collapse, I stumbled past his prone body and headed uphill. Soon, I was hobbling past the castle whose windows exuded the warm amber of fireplaces, but no sounds of struggle or terror made it past its walls. I truly hoped there were no children being held hostage here, that he had been bluffing to scare me into complying.

Regardless, once I found my way home, I would lead the royal guard back here to make sure of that and to arrest the sorcerer and uncover what else he had hidden within his sinister lair.

But as I scurried into the clearing before the surrounding trees, that aspiration appeared easier said than done.

Once under the shadow of the woods, the stitch in my chest and the pain in my leg became unbearable. I came to a wheezing halt, resting against a tree.

Despite the bright moonlight, not much made it through the thick leaves, leaving my eyes straining to see where to go from here. The only good news was there was no sign of the sorcerer.

I hoped this meant he *had* cracked his skull. If he was at least knocked unconscious, his pursuit was one less thing I had to worry about.

Just as I thought that, I heard something through the gradually quieting hammering of my heartbeat. Something moving.

Jerking back upright, ears alert, I snapped my head in every direction.

The sound came again, a heavy shift, creaking like weak floorboards under a great weight.

This didn't sound like the footfalls of the sorcerer. Rather like the ancient floors of Mistress Agrafina's school before we moved to the palace's practice room. She maintained that her dancers had to be slight not just to be light on their feet, but to avoid risking the delicate base collapsing underneath us. That sound had always made me choose my movements with anxious precision.

But that hadn't prevented the career-ending injury that had left me in this state. One wrong move and an even worse landing, and I could no longer dance, or even run. Nurses had assured me that being who I was, I would never need to run. But here I was.

That creaking grew louder, wrenching me from my pitiful reverie and back into the present. It was closer than I had initially thought from a misdirected echo. I may not have spent much time in nature, but I didn't need to, to know that no ground creaked.

Where was that noise coming from?

The answer came with a crackling burst from right behind me. It scared me off the tree with a shout that tore through the night air, echoing endlessly.

Heart rivaling an orchestra's rhythm section, I realized that tree's leafless branches were

thrashing about like a hundred spastic arms. And there wasn't even a hint of a breeze. Shock kept me still, until I began to hear the same noises from all around me.

Stumbling back, I gaped at the source of the wooden groans, slow to register what I was witnessing. That the tree I'd rested against was uprooting itself, stepping out of its earth.

I stared up, frozen, until it swiped its spindly branches at me, aiming to skewer.

With a shriek, I threw myself down, the attack missing me by a hair's breadth. The heavy sound of it whooshing above me made me shudder and press myself harder against the ground.

Then the tree behind me moved, and I recognized the same weighted creak to know it was advancing towards me.

Giving in to pure instinct, I rolled over just in time to miss the slam that boomed like thunder in my ears, intensifying my shudders and clattering my teeth.

There were two things I now knew for certain: I was in a sentient forest, and if I didn't get out of here fast, those angry trees would crush me to death.

Eyes darting around, panting, I searched for any way out that wasn't the way I came in.

The next thunderous slam to land near me scattered my thoughts, making me leap up and mindlessly run deeper into the woods, away from this animated grove of wooden monsters. Or maybe further into them.

Pumping my arms in a pointless attempt to propel myself faster, I staggered on, heart almost pounding out of my chest, and tears running down my cheeks from the ratcheting pain. But no matter where I went, I heard the trees moving, closing in.

One by one, they took swipes at me, and I could only duck so fast, relying on sound rather than sight.

The acoustics of this place got the better of me in the end.

What sounded far behind was truly ahead of me, and a massive bough swung down right in my path. It was too late to halt my desperate momentum and I tripped towards it, meeting it halfway as it collided with my chest, knocking the remaining air from my burning lungs.

I crashed to the ground on my back, the bruising pain of the rough landing radiating to encase my center, and joining the agony from my ribs and abdominals. It all intertwined with the now searing pain of my ankle, and I couldn't compel myself to move anymore.

All I could do was watch in horror as the tree brought down its finishing blow.

A spark filled my vision, a starburst of brilliant light that made my eyes water, then an inhuman screech ripped through the air, like an agonizing scrape of metal on gravel.

At first, I thought that it was my sight malfunctioning from head trauma, but when the heat reached my body and the flash dimmed into a consistent yet undulating source, I realized the tree had burst into flames.

Struggling to rise on my elbows, I found the shapes of the other animated trees retreating and going still, like they had never moved.

My relief was short-lived. The fire didn't fully consume the wood of my would-be murderer. Bits and pieces started breaking off it and raining over me. A flaming chunk was bound to finish what it couldn't.

Unable to run, I could only force myself onto hands and knees and crawl away, desperately trying to avoid any lethal debris landing on me.

My twisting movements angered every ache and bruise, and the combination of heat and pain made breathing too strenuous. I soon lost the ability to struggle.

Eyelids heavy, body unyielding, I flopped onto the earth, heaving, swallowing more air than what

filtered through my laboring lungs.

I heard the fracturing of the flaming wood before I felt it land on my leg.

My scream was silent, a choking pressure on my throat, my eyes burning, my head swimming.

Consciousness began to flee from my grasp like a kite in the wind. But it couldn't end like this. I couldn't surrender. I had to get out of here, go home, back to my kingdom, my father, Siegfried—

"You're not particularly bright, are you?" The sorcerer's calm voice permeated the dim surroundings and my dimmer awareness.

Seeing his hooded figure draped in shadow, framed by the gnarled arms of the monstrous trees, made my panicked mind perceive him as a featureless creature with giant, clawed fingers reaching for me.

I could only clench my eyes shut, squeezing out tears as I anticipated the worst. The end.

CHAPTER FOUR

Instead of the death blow I expected, the burning weight released my leg.

That relieved the pain, for only a second, before it spread further up my leg.

I cried out in agony as the sorcerer's hands slotted underneath my arms, effortlessly lifting me up, leaving my legs dangling feet above the ground.

Tears flowing thicker, breath stuttering in my burning chest, I found myself facing the outline of his head inside the cloak.

"I should have known you'd be trouble when the form you took was a swan."

I didn't make sense of his rumbled words for a few moments, the pain the only thing blaring in my brain. Then my thoughts tangled.

Hadn't he said that he'd turned me into a swan on purpose…?

"After you attacked me, it took me a while to figure out which way you went. I didn't expect you to do something this stupid, running into a maze of vengeful dryads…"

Suddenly, anger flared within my head, dousing even the agony.

My hand moved of its own accord, delivering a loud smack to his face, knocking it sideways, and the hood off his head.

In the firelight that danced around us, I glimpsed his sharp profile. And his hair, vivid, thick and long.

When he finally faced me, the brightest thing was no longer the fire, but the glowing blue of his eyes. It shone on his face, highlighting its sculpted planes, and the ominous wings of his frown.

Without warning, he dropped me. I landed on my feet gracelessly. The short distance didn't make a difference to the impact on my leg, both old and new injuries shooting lightning bursts of pain that consumed me whole.

I doubled over, gasping. There was no way I could run again. Probably ever.

Helpless and hopeless, I gave in to the temptation to do what he asked—to surrender.

Gulping down the bile filling my throat, I straightened, struck as regal a pose as I could. But I could do nothing to steady my voice as I whispered, "Just do it."

"Do what?" he asked, his deep voice edged with irritation.

"Kill me."

A pause stretched between us, making me anticipate everything I'd read about in the realm of punishment.

What finally broke the silence was his incredulous huff. "Why would I do that?"

"What else are you going to do with me?"

Instead of a clear response, he provided me with a rumbled, "You're no use to me dead."

"What use am I, then?"

He didn't respond, just turned and walked on ahead.

I stared after him, trying to figure out where to go from here.

A few feet away, he stopped, head angled to peer over his shoulder. "Are you coming?"

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"You're welcome to stay here and meet your end at the whims of what lives within these woods," he said nonchalantly. "But if it's survival you're after, your chances with me are far better than the alternative."

Unfortunately, he was right. The trees alone had nearly killed me, and I could have never anticipated their presence. The stars only knew what else lived here, ready to intercept and exterminate any unsuspecting traveler.

He probably knew, but he wasn't going to tell me.

My best bet was to return with him, at least long enough to know his "use" for me, and figure out my way home.

Perhaps he could be reasoned with. Anyone patient enough to deal with Lina had to be.

Lina. What had she done? Where did she even get this idea?

Knowing he also had the answers I needed, with a reluctant sigh that tugged at the bruise that was now my midsection, I began to limp after him, hissing and huffing through the agonizing effort.

"Taking your sweet time, aren't you?" he said as we reached the edge of the woods.

"You're walking too fast," I grunted, every word a struggle.

"I *was* going to carry you back, but then you hit me."

"That slap was the least you deserve, you evil abductor!"

His dismissive snort was now the loudest thing in our vicinity. "Abductor—a new addition to my fearsome reputation."

"You have no problem with 'evil,' then?"

"I've been called that and a variety of synonyms enough times for it to grow dull."

"Who are you? Why are you doing this?" I asked through clenched with pain and anger teeth. "How does my sister know you? What did you offer her in exchange for…for whatever you want to do to me?"

Half-turning, he bowed with a sarcastic flourish. "Your captor, Lord von Rothbart, at your service. And your sister sought me out, not the other way around."

I froze, running that name through my mind.

Von Rothbart was an infamous sorcerer, blamed for a variety of disasters and eerie occurrences, from people disappearing to their lives becoming derailed. I'd long believed him to be a new legend, an entity on which people pinned the blame for their own misfortunes and misdemeanors.

Yet here he was. With me at his mercy.

A whirlpool of outrage, disbelief and dread swarmed in my chest, where every breath was a stab to the jagged aches spawned by the clobbering trees.

Suddenly, I found him directly before me, framed by the moonlight, long face encased in shadow, yet his eyes were as clear as blue-hot flames. He even smelled like the intense, contained heat of a fireplace, filling me with an illogical sense of calm.

"You're limping, and breathing with great difficulty."

I stared up at him, trying to remember how to breathe through my nose rather than my wheezing

mouth. “What?”

“I may not have gotten this burning branch off you fast enough. And you may have broken ribs.” He reached for me and I lurched back, foot landing at the worst angle, ripping a sharp cry from my trembling lips.

In all the whispered stories, von Rothbart was a fearsome creature, described as inhuman, a being made of shifting shadows, or an ungodly mix of man and beast.

From what I could see, he appeared human. The perfect disguise to slip into any place unsuspected and inflict curses on hapless people in the name of—

Lina. As clear as her involvement had been, and his claim that he’d done this to me at her request, I still couldn’t believe that she’d sought out this man to harm me.

I couldn’t accept that my own sister, my twin, had thrown me to this fate without a second thought.

Wildfire spread within me, intensifying all my bodily agony and the intangible stabs and scrapes of misery. My heart was pierced by a dozen red-hot needles. My throat was closing up, shriveling under the heat stoked by the dark maelstrom of my feelings.

Seeing no use in putting up a defiant front anymore, I openly sobbed, hot tears trailing down my dirtied cheeks. The alarming difficulty of my breathing intensified, a noise that would have struck the fear of death into anyone that heard it in the dark.

Too caught up in my spiraling descent into turmoil, I barely noticed him picking me up.

All I registered before I burrowed into the warmth of his chest and rested my burning eyelids was relief at being off my feet.

CHAPTER FIVE

Waking up was a struggle. My limbs and head felt filled with lead, and it was as if I fought against a weight that kept me down, sinking me into a soft surface.

After a few false starts, my lashes fluttering against an irritating brightness, I awoke drowsy and disoriented to find midday light pouring through mounted windows, casting their designs onto an alabaster floor.

Slumped against thick pillows, I remained groggy, seeing but not truly seeing the people nearby. Some on other beds, others fussing about in soothing blue robes.

Noticing someone approaching finally roused me.

"You're up!" greeted a young woman in that blue outfit, her auburn hair pulled back in a low bun, watery-blue eyes shining with goodwill, freckled cheeks rosy like ripe peaches. "You gave us quite a scare, miss."

Unsure how to respond, I merely blinked at her as I tried to recollect what I might have done to scare these…nurses?

Trying to sit up sparked a stabbing pain in my side, and I slouched back down with a stifled cry.

That was when everything came rushing back to me.

My confirmation ball, Siegfried, the sorcerer Lina had invited to abduct me, whom I had tried to flee from into a forest filled with ferocious flora.

Clearing my throat, I put on my best courteous smile, though the stiffness in my cheeks no doubt made it a grimace. "Where am I, Miss…?"

"Imelda." She helped me sit back up, shushing my hisses of pain soothingly. "You're in Castle Mondsee. The headmaster found you in the woods, said you'd been attacked by dryads."

"Headmaster?"

Had the sorcerer dropped me off at a school when I proved too much trouble to keep? That would make my attempts to get back home easier.

Imelda poured me a glass of water from the jug on the nightstand. "Yes. Would you like me to fetch him?"

"Please do."

With a shimmy, Imelda headed out, leaving me to observe the other occupants of the long room. Clearly an infirmary. There were three other nurses, and a man had entered, a doctor perhaps, in tailored grey trousers, white button-up shirt and grey coat. The beds were occupied by children, the closest to my right about twelve, fast asleep with his head wrapped in bandages, the one on my left

about nine, being spoon-fed soup by a nurse.

Overall, a safe environment. I could begin to relax.

When Imelda returned, I choked on my gulp of water, spraying some of it back out across the bed covers.

Though I had barely seen him in the dark of the woods, I knew it was him when he came to a stop by my bed.

Tall and lean, in a russet coat that matched his trimmed beard, his tawny hair hung over his wide shoulders in soft waves, softening the firm, long planes of his face.

I reached for the jug, ready to throw it at his head, but the restrictive pain in my chest made me halt my movement. Flopping back on the bed to helplessly watch as he sat by my legs, I heaved in harsh breaths.

No longer glowing, his clear blue eyes, reflections of a morning sky, regarded me pensively. "I'd watch myself if I were you. One wrong move and you'll undo the hard work the healers are doing on your body."

"What are you talking about? I'm in pain all over!"

"Believe it or not, this is just healing pain. You had two fractured ribs, many others bruised, severely contused abdominals and a burnt leg. But the healers tell me they're almost done fixing most of that." He eyed my right foot. "Though this seems to have been troubling you long before your witless foray into the woods."

"None of this would have happened if you hadn't kidnapped me!" I hissed. "Imelda said she was bringing me a headmaster. Where is he?"

"You're looking at him." He leaned back to cross his long legs, knee-high riding boots gleaming in the light. "Headmaster Dietrich Morgenstern, at your service—again."

This had to be a trick.

"You said you were the menace von Rothbart. Do people here know that?"

He cocked one arched eyebrow lazily. "What's it to you?"

"If I expose that truth to them, you would lose your station in this place," I threatened, muscles trembling. "I doubt people would want to work in a place run by a notorious criminal."

"You'd be surprised how many institutions and countries are run by the worst of society," he said, unfazed. "Take the useless King Ludwig of Lyonesse and his evil hag of a queen. No one is trying to overthrow them, are they?"

Siegfried's father, who'd passed him over for his child brother. And his mother, who I always heard wasn't beloved by her people. Was her supposed "evil" involved in this matter? Did that story have more to it than succession strife?

And why did *he* bring up this example in specific?

Refusing to be distracted from my immediate purpose, I shook my head. "Then I doubt people would want their children in your care, when they learn you're keeping me here against my will."

He only smiled at me coyly. "Why, Aventina, I found you lost in the woods, at the mercy of dryads, remember? Without treatment, you might have died, and you're still in terrible condition after all the healers' efforts. Keeping you here under observation is for your own good."

Aghast, since everything he'd said was essentially true, I stuttered out my frustration and fury, watching his smile turn into a smirk.

He patted my ankle, irritating the dull, pounding pain, making me grow wooden. "Try to blackmail me again, and I'll turn you into a turkey and serve you to the children for Solstice dinner."

When he stood, I threw caution to the wind and grabbed him by his sleeve, yanking him back.

"Why are you doing this? Why bother treating my injuries if you plan to keep me as your prisoner?"

"I told you, your sister commissioned me. She gave me permission to take you; therefore, I did not 'kidnap' or 'abduct' you."

"I don't know what bizarre dialect you speak in whatever country we're now in, but you took me against *my* will. This *is* abduction. I am a missing person, and my people will be looking for me."

"Why would they, if no one is aware of such a thing?"

"What are you talking about?"

"As far as anyone's concerned, Princess Aventina continued her night as planned: she danced with the prince, entertained her guests, and bid her father good night—all her courtiers and staff can attest to that."

Everything inside me slowed down as his words sank into the cracks of my chaotic state.

Dietrich smoothly slipped his sleeve from my grip, his fingertips grazing across the tender underside of my forearm, releasing a trail of sparks under my skin that made my hand drop limply to my side.

Gently, he picked up my enervated wrist as he leaned closer, and spelled out my situation for me. "Princess Avelina commissioned me to perform a seamless exchange, which I did. She has now taken your place."

In the midst of my mind-breaking panic, too caught up in the shock of being turned into a swan, I had fractured memories of Lina. She had styled herself in an identical dress and hairstyle, had taken the tiara Father had gifted to me, which had belonged to our grandmother, Queen Olga.

She had impersonated me. If anyone was now "missing," it was her.

Distraught at the solidifying realization, I was overcome by a wave of nausea that threatened to upend the rest of the water with the burning digestive juices in my stomach.

"What's to become of me now?" I finally choked out.

His eyes trailed over me, tinged with contemplation. "I'm sure we'll find some use for you."

Despite feeling like I'd been run over by a carriage and stomped into the ground by its horses, I didn't hesitate to inflict more pain on myself. I took the chance his proximity provided and slammed my head against his.

Like I had taken a chisel to my forehead, the piercing pain started from the collision spot and spread across my skull.

Laughter filled my ears, and I forced my swimming sight to focus back on him, discovering that my effort had been futile.

Rubbing his own forehead, Dietrich's chest rumbled with amusement. "I admire your resolve, pointless as it is."

I tried growling at him, but I was so worn down by the all-around misery, I failed to put any real bite into it. It just came out as a pathetic whimper. "Just let me go."

"So you can try getting yourself killed again?"

"Why would you care if I do? You helped my sister steal my life! Don't act like it has any value to you."

Rising, he dusted non-existent lint from his coat and sighed. "It does have value, I'm just not sure what it is yet."

The open vagueness of such a statement made me shudder with dread. He could do anything to me, worse than transforming me into a bird, and I'd be powerless to stop it.

"What did she tell you to do with me?"

Instead of answering, he frowned. "Your sister isn't a forward-thinker, and that tends to spell

disaster for customers like her."

Customers. He spoke as if he were a welder and she'd commissioned a sword from him.

"Meaning?"

He shrugged. "Meaning her wish to become you might not prove to be all she thought it'd be. She might be forced to changed her mind one day, might pay even more to have you back than she did to be rid of you."

"So, what? You'll keep me in storage for if that day comes?"

One winged eyebrow cocked. "If, not when?"

"You underestimate how stubborn Lina is," I snarled at him. "She'll continue doing something that imposes on her just to be spiteful, or to avoid being proven wrong. Really, keeping me here in the event she changes her mind is pointless, because she won't. I'm also not some docile princess who'll just give in and be a model prisoner. I'll be too much trouble to keep."

"And I should just let you go?"

"Exactly."

"I appreciate you changing your strategy, but the answer is still no." He smoothed back his hair, locks of it catching the light from the window, shining like pale bronze. "But you have given me more to think about. Even in the unlikely event she wished for you back, the docile princess you're evidently not, would not be grateful and quietly resume your life. You would probably not rest until you punished her for her betrayal and me for my involvement in it. So, no matter how much trouble you prove to be, I'm keeping you here."

If my head weren't already pounding, I'd smack myself over it. I'd ruined any possibility that he might send me home by being too defiant. I'd shared too much information and it had only cemented his decision to imprison me.

Out of options, my desperation only had one hope left, that Lina would expose herself.

"People are going to notice!" I yelled after him as he got up and turned away. "We're nothing alike, personality wise. It won't be long until they know that's not me."

"You're giving people too much credit," he said with a heavy sigh. "They'll see her sleeping in your quarters, doing your duties, wearing your clothes, courting your prince. Why would they suspect anything's wrong?"

"You sound very sure of yourself," I gritted.

He winked at me as he retreated. "It's not the first time I've worked in impersonation. Though your sister, being your twin, saved me the effort of performing a transfiguration spell on her, too. Easiest money I've ever made."

At a loss, I watched him leave.

Whatever I had hoped to come out of this confrontation with, it had been reduced to ashes. But a few embers of resilience remained, smoldering and bright.

A future queen wasn't raised to give up that easily.

CHAPTER SIX

There were other children here. A lot of them.

Across many ages, they moved in lines in and out of rooms or ran together outside, chatting, shouting and laughing, forcing me to conclude they weren't being held hostage by him.

As I was rolled down one wide corridor in a wheelchair, I peered into a few rooms as we passed them. There were things inside some that I didn't recognize, but in each I did find desks and a blackboard.

So this truly was a school?

If so, it was an idiotic place to keep someone both he and his contractor wanted to disappear.

On second thought, this would be the last place anyone would look for me.

Not that anyone would. He'd made sure of that.

Calculating demon. How many times had he done this? Did he have a menagerie of birds made up of all the girls he'd kidnapped? And why had he turned me back? Because of the "use" he had for me?

As Imelda the nurse pushed my wheelchair along, she chattered away about the system running Mondsee Academy, which according to her, was a school of magic. That explained the inexplicable things I'd seen in some of the classrooms. But the only thing of note that made it past the buzz of my distracted surveillance was that she and the other nurses, and apparently all the teachers, had been educated here as children.

"Where are we exactly?" I asked her, trying to calculate the distance between this place and my home.

"What do you mean?"

"What country, state, city, town?" I asked, too eagerly, unable to restrain my desperation. "What path do you take in and out of here that doesn't lead to those trees that attacked me?"

Imelda grew quiet, merely continuing our tour of the floor.

"Are we in Avongart?" I pressed. "Your names sound like they're from there."

"I'm sorry, miss. We take this school's safety very seriously. We can't let anyone know where we are."

"Not even the parents?"

"Well, if the children are in touch with theirs, then they themselves were former students and know the necessity of keeping this location a secret."

I let out a frustrated exhale. "But you must know I pose no threat to you. I just want to know where

I am, for my own peace of mind."

"Divulging information is up to Headmaster Morgenstern. You must ask him."

He was certainly not going to give me any answers.

Turning at the waist, I widened my eyes in my best innocent face. I added a delicate crack that had never failed to guilt my old governess, Xenia—back when Lina and I were unaware of the difference in our rank and future, and I sometimes emulated her misbehavior, if in my own way. "Imelda, please. I'm lost and wounded. My family must be worried sick. I need to send them a letter, tell them of my condition and whereabouts so they can come take me home!"

Imelda's mouth wobbled, but it was a brief weakness that she fought off.

Shaking her head, she firmly said, "No. I'm sorry. You may be well-intentioned, but to help you would be too risky."

"Why? What could anyone do to a building manned by sorcerers?"

Her face grew grim, chubby cheeks sagging, the twinkle in her eyes snuffed out. "Let's just say those trees are where they are for a reason."

Great load of help this nurse was.

Groaning internally, I decided to switch my strategy. "All right, how long until you can release me from treatment?"

"That's up to Healer Eisenhardt's assessment. She should be back within the week."

"Back from?"

She gave me a fed-up look. I'd been too obvious in my attempts to pry information.

What could anyone here be scared of? If this place was full of magic and surrounded by it, then *they* were the fearsome ones, especially when they were all clustered together like this.

As we turned back to the area of the infirmary, a group of children no older than twelve passed by us, giggling, the ties of their uniforms askew or loosened, some shirts untucked, and bags messily packed, crumpled papers peeking out the unfastened tops.

I watched them, searching again for any signs of reluctance to be here. But there were none. They wouldn't be out of place in our classes at the palace, where we took our regular subjects with the children of staff and courtiers, before I was elevated to specialized schooling. They actually looked way happier to be here than we'd ever been in any school environment.

One girl with an upturned nose and red pigtails waved at me as we passed, giving me a gap-toothed smile. Torn between remaining aloof and an instant fondness, I waved back with a wobbling grin.

As we turned the corner, I found we were heading somewhere I didn't recognize. "Aren't we going back to the infirmary?"

"It's suppertime, and we keep food inside dining rooms unless a patient can't feed themselves. I'll take you back later for rest and observation."

"You sure have a lot of rules around here," I murmured bitterly.

"Oh, you know, you let one or two things slide and it won't be long until everything becomes chaotic," she said cheerfully. "Children need limitations and order, especially our kind. You can't risk being undisciplined with magic. That's how you get dark sorcerers who become the stuff of lore and sow fear against us."

I touched my still tender midsection. "That's funny considering who you work for."

If I was expecting shock or denial, I got the opposite. As she pushed me through the doorway of a massive dining room her tone dampened. "The headmaster has his reasons. Try not to judge him too harshly."

My facial muscles tensed with irritation. “Oh, ‘reasons’! How convenient! Compromising your morals when it comes to certain people.”

She sighed. “I see by your mood that you weren’t given enough painkilling potion.”

That mood soured further when I saw Dietrich standing at the end of the bustling space, surveying his “students.” He was framed by the warm afternoon light streaming through the arched window, casting a long shadow that engulfed me as we approached him. His eyes glowed faintly, and his hair gleamed like burnished bronze.

“She hasn’t eaten all day, sir,” Imelda said, halting my roll before the circular oakwood table closest to where he stood. “Make sure she has her fill.”

He gave her a curt nod. “Will do.”

With that, Imelda left me alone with him.

Acting on instinct, I reached for the cutlery, grabbing a carving knife off the table and pointing it his way. “Stay where you are.”

His sharp, bright eyes flickered like candle flames in the wind, bearing a hint of amusement and no sign of worry. “You think that would do anything to me?”

“You still bleed, don’t you?”

“And how would things go for you if you gutted me?” He held out his arms, blocking half the window with his wide form and the cloak that threatened to slip off his shoulders. “Hurt me on my own turf and you might get worse than becoming poultry.”

“Now you’re all about territorial ethics? You hurt me on *my* own turf.”

“Except I didn’t.” Dietrich flicked his fingers and the knife flew out of my grip as if it was a leaf in a windstorm, making me gasp. He plucked it out of midair, put it down way out of my reach. “But thanks for the heads up. I won’t leave deadly things within your grasp again.”

I glowered at him, swallowing my urge to tremble. “If you want to keep me in a dungeon or a tower, then just do so.”

He shook his head, making his hair catch the sunlight in flares of russet and bronze. “Absolutely not. The towers are for boarding, and you are not a student. And the dungeon is for trespassers, and we’ve had an unusual number of those recently, so there’s no room for you there, either.”

In any other situation, the humor that filled his smooth, deep voice would have tickled my own. All it did now was infuriate me further.

“But after debating what to do with you all day, I figured we could have a discussion over dinner.” With a wave of his hand, the circular table became filled with a full-course meal. Covered plates, bowls and goblets, all wafting scents that hooked their steam trails into my nostrils and yanked my unwilling head closer.

It would have been hard to continue resisting when my stomach gave me away, growling like an antagonistic dog.

“What is there to discuss?” I avoided his gaze by examining the food; honey-glazed roasted pork alongside fried potatoes, a selection of vegetables seasoned with a mouthwatering variety of spices, a creamy soup, and fresh, brown bread rolls. “The conditions of my release?”

Tucking himself into the seat across from me, Dietrich reached for a crystal goblet filled with red wine. “More like finding you a new purpose now that your sister has taken yours.”

“Are you going to keep throwing that in my face?” I ripped a roll apart, channeling my urge to pull out his luxurious hair.

“I will, until you understand it’s no use being angry at me or resisting what I offer you.”

“And what is it that you offer exactly?”

He swirled his drink, regarding it with more interest than myself. “You could work here, teach the students what you learned growing up in a palace, help them acquire jobs in that echelon of society.”

“Why? So more of your ilk can steal away into events and bewitch attendees?” I stabbed the roll with a fork, imagining it was that graceful hand. “Planning to run an operation, are you? A crime ring of sorcerers corrupting the ruling class?”

“Tempting idea, but no,” he said offhandedly, sipping. “Once, court magicians were a necessity in some kingdoms, and their nobility and gentry vied to have one of their own in their households. I want to bring that back into fashion. It would be a good future for those who leave here with no place to go.”

“Why can’t they go home?”

He leveled me with a weary stare. “This is the only home many here have ever known, and while they’re here, they’re under my protection. Once they graduate, I need to be sure they’re as safe as I kept them here.”

As I digested that, his earlier mention of trespassers in the dungeon took on a new meaning. Had these paused a threat to the students? If so, a dungeon seemed like a merciful punishment from the evil von Rothbart. Unless he was keeping them there as rodents.

Focusing back on my own dilemma, I asked, “And what do I get in exchange for this etiquette class you want me to teach? Thirteen years of servitude before I’m set loose?”

“You seem to be under the impression that you can find your way back to your old life, but I’d be out of a job if my work could be that easily undone.” Setting down his glass, he stared down at his meal. “You don’t have to answer now. You can think this over while you recover.”

“Think what over? Spending the rest of my days bound here, helping create more of you?”

As if reflecting a spike in his mood, the glow of his eyes, which had subsided as we talked, flashed like the stoked flames of a fireplace. “Not if I can help it. The only reason I am putting this idea forth is because I want better fates for them than the one I was dealt.”

“That’s all? You have no plans of influencing society or politics by planting your students in the most important households of each land?”

“Whether they meddle or not in either is up to them. But I’m not preparing them for it, and strictly advise against it. All I desire from this effort is for the perception of magic and those who practice it to be swayed in a more positive, or at least neutral direction.”

“Any negative perception people have of you is your own doing, I assure you.”

He stood abruptly, making me jerk with apprehension. “We’re done here. Think it over.”

“I won’t! If you think I’d ever work for the likes of you, then you are mad!”

He regarded me for a long moment before he nodded, to himself, apparently, as if he’d come to a decision.

Then with his full mouth tugging into a firm line, he said, “A few days in the lake ought to cool your temper.”

As he flung that swirling golden light my way, all I could do was throw my arms over my head and scream as my body contorted and my skin burned with the emergence of feathers.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Maintaining a human mind in the body of a swan was a maddening condition.

I could say that was purely the horror of being transfigured beyond recognition, but I had to admit, the boredom was getting to me as well.

Sailing along the surface of the lake with the sun beating down on my head was unbearably tedious. Not to mention feeling driven to always look for food. Wet, cold, slimy food that slithered down my long, long throat, or live food I had to swallow down still wriggling and thrashing. Encountering the other occupants of the area was also taxing. I had nearly gotten into a fight with a territorial mother goose who must have thought I was aiming to snatch one of her goslings.

Then there came the futile efforts of pestering the Mondsee Academy students—when they came down to feed me gross, soggy bread—for help. All I got from them was, initially, amused laughter and then screams of panic when I limped out of the water to chase them, honking, "HELP ME!"

Apparently, Dietrich was the only one who spoke Swan.

Then I remembered just how vicious waterbirds could be. I couldn't blame the children for getting scared.

Since I couldn't use my hurt leg much, which still ached in this form, my movement across the lake was slow and circular, like my thoughts of escape.

When the sun began to head west, I saw a goose kick out of the water with a flutter of its wings and launch into flight—and my hope was reignited.

I couldn't run, but I could fly! How hadn't I thought of it before?

Flapping, I tried following it out, but all I did was splash around. I tried again, this time with my wings lifted higher, and felt a rush of wind being drummed up by my feathers.

Just as I felt my body rise from the water, I dropped back down with a splash.

I let out a frustrated screech that filled the lake.

That was all it took for the mother goose to come sailing back out from behind her reeds and furiously chase me.

One slap-fight of feathers and surprisingly sharp teeth later, I made it back onto the pebble beach, winded and thinking of all the goose-based dishes I would order when I got home.

Regaining my breath, I sat and watched the other birds, paying close attention to how they flew. There had to be something I was doing wrong, because as terrible as Dietrich was, he at least hadn't clipped my wings. They worked, I just needed to know how.

Before, I'd never given much thought to the movement of animals beyond the comparisons

Mistress Agrafina had given us during class. About the fluid prowl of a cat, the powerful gait of a horse, or the clever stealth of a wolf. Each was a reminder about the importance of steady, controlled movements and grace, vital lessons for a ballerina.

All I knew of swans before now was that they had odd, rubbery necks that looked like an impediment to flight. But as I watched one of the few swans in the lake extend her large wings and shake the water off her feathers, I felt time slow its pace, allowing me to see each seemingly negligible step in the process of kicking off the water surface and flying up.

Enraptured, I mimicked her to the best of my abilities, spreading my wings out and moving them back and forth to a precise beat, standing on one flat foot to ease the pain of the other. I tried to imagine I was back on stage, one leg raised to establish a strong balance before moving my arms in gentle yet controlled flaps, like the flutter of a bird's wings.

Then I felt my webbed feet leave the beach.

Astonishment filled my smaller body, but not enough to halt my momentum. I continued, encouraged by the success, and soon I was rising up, up and away.

Too caught up in maintaining my ascension, the reality of what was happening took a few minutes to sink in. Then as my scope grew larger and the layout of the castle grew smaller, I fully felt it. I was flying.

I was flying.

Taking a celebratory risk, I spun and dipped a few feet, hooting excitedly.

I wanted to continue experimenting with my flight, to perform all the aerial acrobatics I'd long witnessed birds doing from my windows, when I was earthbound and relegated to symbolically mimicking them through leaps and twirls.

But now was not the time to indulge. I had to get out of here.

Flapping faster, I flew farther away from my prison and towards the clouds. From this high up, I could see the terrain below as if it were expertly painted by a master cartographer. Snaking paths in the middle of hills, texture and shading indicating rocks and trees, a variety in colors coming from settlements, and the moving dots of wildlife and people on horseback.

We weren't too far from civilization, it seemed. But now that I was up here, I had to figure out which way to go. I knew I wasn't in Opona, and the first sign of its direction would be the great mountain range where Grandfather Frost was said to make his home.

For now, my best bet was to follow the people I could spot on the path below, and they were heading east. Opona was in the northeast of the Folkshore.

The further I got from Mondsee, the more confident I was that I was heading in the right direction—and the more tired I became.

Keeping up the steady beat of my wings required too much focus and energy. I didn't know how birds made flight appear so effortless. It was as strenuous as sprinting, if not more so.

Exhaustion started creeping up on me, until spotting the Dedmorez Mountains gave me a burst of endurance. I was getting closer to home!

I'd be back to my father and Siegfried, I'd peck Lina into the ground then have her imprisoned for treason, and I'd see von Rothbart and his den of sorcery dismantled!

But getting home, even now that I was in the right direction, was a feat easier said than done. The temperature plummeted as I came closer to the mountains, and I felt myself grow stiff with cold, the sharp air biting at my feathers and eyes.

It was getting to be too much. I'd been flying for what felt like days, and I needed to land and rest. But I couldn't trust that I'd be able to resume my flight. Or that, once I lost the heat of exertion, I

wouldn't freeze to death.

The range was too wide to circumvent. I had to risk flying even higher and over it.

As I exerted myself to cross the frigid peaks of the mountain, I developed a new appreciation for birds that flew long distances in their migrations. How much strength and resilience could a small body and mind contain?

Pushing myself harder than I ever had, or ever thought I could, I passed over the mountain and was welcomed on the other side by a familiar terrain and a warmer updraft, lessening my shivers.

In the distance, I could see the sprawling capital with its bell tower and the onion-shaped domes of my palace. That spurred me on, fueling my determination to wear myself out, even beyond the point of damaging exhaustion, as long as I reached my home.

A shadow came over me as I flew towards the bell tower and stabbed an arrow of fear through my madly pounding heart even before I dared to peek at its source.

An enormous horned owl with a wingspan to block out the sun hovered above me, talons curled out, ready to sink into my back.

The terrifying sight threw off my momentum. My stuttering pace sent me tumbling down with a screech, flapping desperately and praying to every god I knew by name to keep me from crashing into the tower.

By some miracle, I rose back up, heart punching out a bruising beat against my damaged ribs, and continued on my path.

Yet no matter how fast or how hard I flapped my wings, the greater size and strength of the giant owl allowed it to overtake me, coming to a hover that blocked my path.

Diving down and rising up in an inverted arc, I managed to evade its grasp, air shearing through my open beak. Smothering the dread that creature stoked within me, I tried to think of nothing but the distance remaining until I reached my destination.

I was getting back to that palace even if it killed me!

Slipping away from the owl's grasping talons once again, I shredded my lungs in a final burst of speed to cross the outer walls and sail into the courtyard. My best bet to be rid of it was to go through the hedge maze.

But that plan evaporated once I entered, forcing me to fly up before I slammed into the people filling the paths.

A burgeoning party was in session, the music and activities so lively, only a few attendees noticed the lone swan shooting through the air above them and the gigantic owl in pursuit. They soon turned their attention back to their dances and games of polo, archery, and croquet. Then at one edge of the maze, there was the sight I'd dreaded.

Perfectly poised in a fuchsia dress, with her hair down and in picturesque waves, Lina had fully committed herself to this charade. She might not be styling herself like I would anymore, but she was holding herself with my open ease rather than her usual antagonistic posture. She'd even schooled her sour face into a serene expression, painted lips quirked in a small smile as Siegfried demonstrated how to shoot a crossbow.

She set her hand on his shoulder, leaning fully into him as she watched his arrow hit the bullseye. As she whooped, he shot her a pleased grin and tickled under chin, making her giggle.

He hadn't noticed she wasn't me.

No one had.

The pain of my leg, lungs and ribs was nothing compared to the crumbling of the hopes that had powered my escape.

But I couldn't let this continue. I had to do something!

"SIEGFRIED!" I shouted, struggling to stay airborne. "That's not me! It's a trick!"

Shouts, laughter and even complaints at my frenzied honks rose from the crowd, and it finally got Lina's attention.

As she looked up, I could see that she knew it was me at once—and that it infuriated her. Her pure outrage could have set every shrub around alight.

Pressing closer to Siegfried, her mouth at his ear, she pointed in my direction. With a grin, he aimed his crossbow my way and pulled the trigger.

The arrow pierced my wing.

Sharp metal tore through my flesh, unleashing instant agony. A kind I hadn't felt since injuring my leg. That, and a combination of undoing my various injuries' healing by my strenuous escape, and the blow of betrayal finally knocked me out of the air.

I hit the grass hard, knocking out what little air had remained in my overworked lungs and rattling my cracked ribs. It was too much to bear. There wasn't anything I could do as they approached my fallen body.

It felt like déjà vu as Siegfried reached down for me while Lina watched with malicious glee.

But while Dietrich had only picked me up by the wings, Siegfried's hands curled around my neck.

"Please," I whispered to him, desperation shredding my insides. "Please recognize me."

"Better snap its neck fast," Lina said, viciousness underlining her sweet tone. "Put the poor thing out of its misery."

"As you wish, my dear," Siegfried crooned and increased the pressure around my neck.

I was helpless to avert my tragic demise. All I could do was lie there, trembling, heart shattering, limply awaiting the end…

A deafening screech tore through the air, and a great shadow coated us all, inspiring a chorus of screams from the crowd in the background.

Mouth agape, Siegfried released me, rushing back up to struggle with resetting his crossbow. "What is that?"

I only managed to turn my head in time to witness the monstrous horned owl swoop down. It ripped the crossbow out of Siegfried's hands with its talons before he could fire it, and swiped bloody scrapes across his face with a powerful beat of its wings.

Lina wasn't spared from its wrath, as it pursued her once it had Siegfried on the run.

The arrow in my wing kept me from enjoying her shrieks of fright, especially since the owl flew back to me when Lina and Siegfried had joined the fleeing herd.

I couldn't contain my terror as it filled my waning view, massive auburn wings spread, taloned feet ready to grab me.

Whatever I was anticipating, it wasn't a gentle grip that softly lifted me off the ground.

The palace shrank beneath me as we soared back up into the sky, and I had no fight or will left in me to resist.

My own twin had ordered my execution at the hands of the man I'd chosen to be my prince.

With that heartbreaking fact weighing me down, I gave in to the dark tug of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I didn't know how long I'd been in the infirmary.

After my great escape's greater failure, I'd had more nurses assigned to my surveillance, not just for the collection of injuries I'd aggravated and sustained, but to contain me should I try making a run for it again.

Not that I would. I now knew how far my home was, how impossible it would be to reach without wings, and I didn't think Dietrich would turn me into a swan again. Even if he did, in that form, I would only be game to be shot out of the sky.

In human form, I'd discovered that Siegfried's arrow had pierced my left upper arm and had, in Imelda's furious words, "Missed the vein by a lucky inch. You'd have bled out otherwise."

Seeing no use in fighting or making another bid for freedom, I requested as much of the sleeping draughts and painkiller concoctions as they'd allow me and spent my recovery time in a miserable haze.

By the time Healer Eisenhardt had returned and administered her specialized healing magic on me, I had been weaned off the numbing drinks.

"What difference does it make?" I now grouched at Imelda. "You want me quiet and contained, right? Give me some more of that stuff then."

"The difference is that you could grow dependent on it. And you're now well enough to leave the infirmary." Imelda gave me a light shove. "Out you go."

Grumbling, I obliged her, shuffling out despite the remaining ache and weakness in my ankle. "Was there any reason the healer didn't fix my leg while she was at it?"

"She did."

I pointed my toes, then flexed them, feeling the joint pop worryingly. "It's back to how it was before I came here."

Imelda winced, eyeing my foot with sympathy. "Not much can be done with old injuries. By this point your body has been altered and considers this its natural state."

"Oh," I said quietly, suddenly too aware of the difference in strength between the joints that bore my weight.

She patted me on the back. "I'm sorry, we really did the best we could."

Tamping down my disappointment, I smiled at her, for they, and especially she, had helped me immeasurably. "I know. Thank you, for everything."

"Try to stay out of harm's way for a bit, all right?"

"How else will I see you again? You're the only one here I know, or like."

She laughed softly. "You don't need medical attention to see us. We gather in staff rooms on our breaks."

Staff rooms. She was assuming I'd accept her headmaster's offer to help prepare these children for noble households.

Could I do that?

Out in the hall, where lines of children trailed out of their final classes of the day, with the thick castle walls thankfully smothering their cacophony a bit, I let my eyes roam over the doors. Each was fastened with a placard whose engraving declared its purpose.

Arithmetic. Enchantments. Brewing. Transformation. The subjects went on as I headed out the hall and ascended the spiral staircase to the nearest tower, passing what must be the boarding rooms, quiet at this time of day.

My aimless wandering led me to the top of the tower, a spacious, circular room with many windows, some open to let in the cool breeze. It had a curious layout of shelves and tables crowded with instruments and maps, and a brass telescope aimed out one window.

I walked towards it, found the sun setting behind the spruce trees and sighed heavily. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"I already offered you an idea."

Startled out of my melancholy, I swung towards the direction of the voice. His voice.

I found him in giant owl form, perched in the nearest window, silhouetted by the waning daylight, casting a massive horned shadow onto the stone floor.

Frozen, I watched as one leg extended down. It transformed from clawed and feathery to human and clothed before it landed, followed by the other one.

Straightening to his full height in owl-man hybrid form, he towered over me, alarming sounds of transformation accompanying his every move, joints popping and bones cracking.

Feathers retreating to unveil more of his familiar figure, all that remained now were the enormous wings and the horned tufts, mimicking the look of a cloak and windblown hair.

To say I wasn't mesmerized by this seamless merge of man and beast would be a lie. It didn't look out of place on him, giving him an even greater sense of importance, and embodying the calm, constant power he exuded.

What a shame such majesty was wasted on him.

"Are you going to put me back in the lake?" I snapped.

Dietrich stared me down, expression somber.

"Well? What is it you're going to do with me now?"

"Talk, if you're willing to listen," he said softly.

"Do I have a choice?"

"You're welcome to stick your fingers in your ears, but I'd appreciate a civil discussion."

If I had a fight left in me, I'd fling an astrolabe at his head. But he'd make it vanish without even snapping his fingers. All it would do was demonstrate my anger, which was useless, and mostly misdirected at this point.

I still scoffed, "Civil? Last time we talked, you lost your temper and turned me back into a swan."

"I didn't lose my temper, just thought you needed to be acquainted with the concepts of change and limitations. I decided you might benefit from a readjustment of your manners and attitude, not to mention your sense of entitlement."

"Manners and attitude?" I laughed bitterly. "Are you under some illusion I owe you any politeness

or consideration? You're my captor!"

"As of now, I'm your gracious host." He passed me, heading for the staircase. "You saw what happened when you tried to go back."

That reminder was a blow to my fragile resolve, leaving spiderweb cracks on its surface. One more hard-hitting truth flung my way and it would shatter.

Tears filled my eyes before I could get a hold of myself. "This is all your fault."

"Is it really?"

"You ruined my life, and now you want to play the part of a helping hand?" I chased after him, gripping the handrail throughout my descent. Climbing up stairs was a worry, but going down always held the threat of falling headfirst. "Everything was going perfectly fine until you showed up!"

"You mean, until your sister's envy became uncontrollable and she contracted me to eliminate you and make her dreams come true." He continued reverting to his human form as he led the way down. "Interesting how you always leave her out of your condemnations."

"Are you claiming this was purely her idea?" I exclaimed, tears freely flowing down my heated face. "That you didn't come to her as you must have to many others, whispering promises in her ear of what you could offer her in exchange for a princess and gold?"

His deep, sarcastic laugh rang off the curves of the staircase and down its hollow center. "Why did you leave out the part about me emerging from the shadows, hissing with my forked tongue and demanding her soul as well as her firstborn, before I went on to con my next hapless maiden?"

How dare he make light of the suffering he'd caused!

I pushed him with all my might, wishing he'd fall like that first time, and this time break that proud nose of his.

He merely leaped the final flight as if it was a couple of steps, landing gracefully on his feet, before turning to face me. "You know, I never minded the insane amount of blame people pinned on the devious Lord von Rothbart, even for the many events I had no part in. It bolstered my reputation, earned me more clients willing to pay whatever it took to secure my services rather than any other sorcerer's." He scowled at me, the expression unsettling on his smooth, deceptively kind face. "But you saw the truth with your own eyes and continue to cling to the delusion that I masterminded this whole ordeal?"

"It doesn't make any sense otherwise!" I shouted, throwing my arms out, crying harder. "Why? What have I ever done to make her hate me so much? It's one thing to covet my status but another to order my death! There was no way she got such a horrid idea on her own."

"Except she did," he growled, more heated than I'd ever heard him. "She wanted me to kill you right after I transformed you, but I told her I had a better use for you, would sacrifice you on the next full moon instead. She agreed on the condition that either way, you'd be dead and gone. I 'abducted' you so I could *spare your life*."

A harsh gasp of shock collided with a heart-wrenching sob, and I missed my step.

Dietrich caught me, hands under my armpits, keeping me lifted enough to alleviate the pressure on my foot and raise me closer to his eye level.

Despite my prayers for it all to be lies, at least misunderstandings, I saw the earnestness in his expression, the honesty in his eyes, and it finally sealed the truth in my cracked heart.

Lina had valued her desires over my life.

My own twin had wanted to kill me, and the dark sorcerer had shown me mercy.

Disorientation overtook me, spreading overwhelming nausea through me as the burn of misery rushed through my blood and came pouring from my eyes.

Sagging against him, I shamelessly cried.

Carefully, he lowered me to the floor, his hands moving from my underarms to wrap around me, sheltering me from the view of the students passing us to take the stairs. I could still hear their curious and concerned murmurs.

I didn't care that they were witnesses to my breakdown, nor that I let myself be held by Dietrich. I was no longer Grand Duchess of Opona. I could afford to collapse into a pitiful mess.

"Join me for dinner," he whispered, softly stroking my hair. "Please."

After a long time when I could only shake with sobs, I finally nodded into his chest.

What did I have to lose at this point?

CHAPTER NINE

Dinner was held in a private section of what the sign declared as the "Teacher's Lounge."

I paid no attention to the staff we passed, too busy wiping my drenched face with the handkerchief he'd offered me. But I caught snippets of them talking about me. About us.

One had to wonder what they thought of my presence, or of their headmaster's involvement in the dissolution of my life. That was, if they were truly aware of his deeds. But then Imelda's behavior hinted that they did.

Lavender-grey walls encased us, with the drawn curtains and the tablecloths a shade darker, and the furniture fastenings violet velvet. True silverware and crystal set the table he led me to, and I could see that its legs matched the wood of the whitewood bookcase behind it. An indulgent sort of interior decoration I wouldn't have expected in a school.

With a flick of his wrist, a chair moved back. "Sit, please."

I dropped into the seat and was immediately pulled in towards the table. My burning eyes could barely focus on the assortment of food that materialized, as he sat across from me and served us cream of mushroom soup, braised pork and mashed potatoes.

Nausea persisting, my appetite was nowhere to be found. I just stared into the pale, sparkling depths of my goblet.

He nudged me to eat a few times, and I finally picked up my spoon to scoop up some soup, only to watch it drip back into its bowl in total detachment.

The bowl vanished and the rest of the food appeared on the plate below it. A tempting arrangement, but not enough to lure my appetite.

In fact, the smell and sight became off-putting and I left the table, rubbing my face as I wandered aimlessly until I reached the window and found myself peering down at the castle courtyard, watching students head from one section to another.

With my rage swallowed up by sorrow, I considered this place from a different line of questioning.

Dietrich had claimed that all he wanted was to prepare his students for becoming magicians at courts and noble households. But if this wasn't a nefarious plot to gain insidious power and influence, and he only wanted secure futures for his alumni, why did he want to hide the school so badly? What did he have to fear, if this wasn't a hub of crime, a von Rothbart replica factory?

I squinted back at him suspiciously. "When you told Lina you had a use for me as a sacrifice, is that something you often do?"

"It's something she expects from von Rothbart. She would have been suspicious if my intentions for you sounded more benign than hers.'

"So you didn't really have a use for me."

"I didn't at the time. I just said that so she'd stop insisting I kill you right there and then. But I already told you, once I thought of it, I could only come up with making use of your knowledge and experience."

"What if I don't believe that answer?"

He caught my eyes, his intense, their blue fire flaring. "What do you believe I'm going to do then?"

The implication hung in the air, fueling my dread.

Dietrich smirked at me, mild amusement reflecting in his dimming eyes. "If you think I'm going to roast and serve you on a silver platter to the dark and evil spirits I consort with, then you'll be disappointed."

I shifted onto my left foot, raising the right one to alleviate pressure and misdirect my urge to twitch. "You threatened to do so if I upset you."

"Which you have, with your dangerous escape, and yet, here you are, uncooked."

My escape ought to have proven that I was too much trouble to keep around—or keep alive. But the only treatment I'd received since then was medical, not punitive. "So, what? Do you do this often? Are all those other waterbirds on the lake girls as well?"

He stared at me dully. "Yes, Aventina, I'm orchestrating a water ballet where all you swans and ducks dance under the full moon for my amusement."

Sarcasm seemed to be his default mode at this point. It was grating. Mostly because it *was* funny. But at least I knew he wasn't going to kill or eat me, or worse.

Useless as it was now, my importance had been drummed into me since birth, and I felt the need to restate it. Even though he'd said he'd turned me into a swan that last time to cure me of my sense of entitlement. "Have you considered that kidnapping a princess will cost you your head once I'm rescued?"

Dietrich snorted dismissively, lounging in his seat, one hand behind his head. "Still think you'll be rescued?"

No. Not anymore. But I had a facade to uphold, even if it had pitifully crumbled with the tears I'd shed on his shoulder. "I'm the crown princess of Opona!"

"Again, that's her now." He tilted his head, brows raised to signal me to sit down. "As far as anyone's concerned, you are Avelina."

That was when I realized a point in this plot I hadn't considered. "Even so, how is 'her' disappearance not causing an uproar and a widespread search?"

"Oh, don't worry. She has everyone believing that petulant, rebellious Lina has run away. She has made sure she is too much trouble without equivalent importance to warrant a serious search. Especially since she has it reported that 'Lina' has run off with the pirate von Rothbart, who accompanied the shady oligarch, Count Drozdov, to your ball."

"But you're von Rothbart!"

He inclined his head towards me. "Am I? It's quite a stretch to accuse any man with a reddish beard of being the infamous von Rothbart the sorcerer, or the pirate."

Her carefully prepared explanation for "Lina's" disappearance had knocked me for a loop. Now my head spun at the basic realization that Rothbart was Avongartan for *Redbeard*.

Refusing to return to the table, I descended onto the sofa by the window, renewed shock at her

betrayal surging so hard it made me unsteady.

I had been avoiding confronting my last sight of her until now, still refusing to believe all this had been her idea.

But it had been.

Lina had asked what I was wearing, how I would be doing my hair, to copy and seamlessly replace me once the ceremony was done, with everything from reasons readied for her disappearance to how troublesome and needless her retrieval would be. This had been long premeditated. Which was why she wanted me dead. To make sure I never returned.

Her face when she'd seen me, even as a swan, had been mortifying. At this point I didn't know what disturbed me more: that it was my own face that emanated such sickening evil, or that it was from my own flesh and blood.

A few false starts culminated in a faltering question. "Explain to me why someone like you would do this? What could possibly be your motive?"

Dietrich, who watched my every move, said, "I told you, your sister commissioned me."

"Yes, but why do you need such side jobs when you have a respectable one here?"

"Have you considered that maybe, just maybe, I needed the money?"

No, I hadn't.

"What would a sorcerer need with money? Can't you just"—I waved my hands about—"conjure gold out of thin air?"

"If I could do that, I'd be the richest man in the world and not taking commissions from viciously ambitious princesses like your sister."

That was a good point.

"Still doesn't explain why you did it. What could she have possibly paid you?"

"More than my last five customers put together, enough to run this place for the next year and set up scholarships for students. It was easy money. I'd have been a fool not to say yes."

My head filled with so many questions, I didn't know what to ask.

Not finding a compromise, I decided to ask them all . After all, the more I knew about him the better.

"What do you mean, money to run this place? Doesn't it run on magic?"

"Ah, yes, I pay the teachers with 'magic.'" He drew out the word *magic* with wondrous whimsy, wiggling his fingers, sparks of golden light flying between them. "I pay the janitorial, kitchen, medical, and childcare staff with 'magic.' I procure food, supplies, and material for upkeep with 'magic.'"

Oh. I hadn't considered any of that.

"Somehow I figured your education as a future leader of the realm would have included economics." He rose to his feet, approaching me, waving a hand over his head, encompassing the entire castle. "A place like this needs funding, and not many students can afford tuition."

That was not the second half of the answer I was expecting.

Embarrassment burned my cheeks. "All right, I get your point."

Never did I know blue eyes could hold so much heat in them. "Do you? What exactly do people think magic is?"

"Snapping your fingers and working miracles, mostly."

"It's anything but that." He paused as his spectacular eyebrows dipped along with his gaze. For a moment, he looked as if he was debating something unpleasant, before he shook his head, exhaled forcibly and returned his eyes back to mine. "Magic is manipulating the elements, others, and yourself

to varying degrees, be it shape-shifting into an owl, turning stone into lava, or making a horse levitate. It's extremely hard to learn and to master, and no matter your innate gift for it, or years of constant practice, you have your limitations." He was almost ranting now, as if he'd had this conversation so many times it had grown too aggravating. "And there is always a price for every act of magic you perform. Most things are just not worth the toll or the effort." He stopped for a moment, as if regretting his outburst, before he suddenly smirked. "Also, why enchant the castle to remain clean when I can give someone a job doing that?"

Heart pounding at this insight into a realm I hadn't considered before, and more importantly, into the inner workings of his mind, I sat up, hoping I could work him up into giving me a way out of this situation. "How do enchantments and curses work then?"

He leveled a probing glance on me, as if reading my intentions, before he lightly shrugged. "You alter the state of something by convincing it this is its true form."

Not very informative.

I tried again, hoping for something more useful. "How do you break curses?"

"Depends on the curse. Sometimes you hide a key to reversing it in the spell itself. It's mostly down to scale and purpose."

"Is there no general trick to reversing them?"

"It would need to be relevant to the curse itself. Also, your situation is not a curse. It's a transformative enchantment that changes at my will."

I gaped at him, feeling exposed. Of course he'd realized why I'd been asking these questions!

He eyed me with a taunting smirk. "If you want me to make it a curse, I can. Should make things more interesting."

The only response I could muster was, "I can pay you."

"To curse you? Now that would be new, though I have gotten some curious requests over the years." He hummed as he tapped his full lower lip, as if recalling some of those. "The 'late' queen of Galantis asked me to turn her into a mermaid."

"Why are you saying 'late' like that?"

"Because Iolanthe didn't die, she just disappeared into the sea." He tsked, shaking his head as he sat down on the other side of the couch. "Coastal people are strange, wouldn't you agree? Seeing the sea that often must be maddening."

By now, whatever hint of anger he'd held earlier had dissipated. Now it felt like he was humoring me, continuing his strange attempt to soothe my emotional turmoil.

It wasn't hard to follow the path of conversation he'd steered into, since I did find it intriguing. "I always heard and read that sailors and pirates always speak of the sea as if it's alive, that they miss it when they're on land, and claim to hear it calling to them."

"For all we know, it could be. Or something living in it."

"Like sirens? Do those exist? Or is that just another word for mermaid?"

"Despite the confusion in some languages, where siren and mermaid are interchangeable, yes, they both exist." He leaned forward, his eyes glinting with interest, his glossy hair falling around his face and brushing his broad shoulders. "I'm curious how people in Opona would know of sirens. It's too far north and too cold for those creatures. Or is it just hearsay?"

"I have no idea." I shrugged, eyeing my feet, moments from my childhood surfacing through the depths of my mind like soap bubbles, each encasing a particular instance. "But when I was twelve, I played the role of the siren queen, Aella, in a production of *The Journey Home*."

No recognition showed in his eyes. "Ah."

“You’ve never heard of that ballet?”

“Our artistic education here has long been more simplistic,” he said, stroking his beard. “Traditional dances and the accompanying music. As for the stage, it’s the standard local plays and the odd musical. Was your ballet based on anything I’d be familiar with?”

“It was about Eurydicus, the king who was lost at sea and visited many fantastical places on his journey home to his wife, Galene.”

Giving me an excited smile, he rose, heading to the bookcases lining the wall. He dragged his fingertips over the book spines, his fingers crackling with that golden light. Next moment, a dusty tome emerged from the line. With a wave of his hand, he turned it in midair so its engraved cover faced me. It bore the golden title: THE EURYDICIAD.

“This was left to me by my predecessor, Headmaster Morgenstern.”

He floated the book towards me, and with a thrum of elation, I grabbed it out of the air, skimming the browned pages. “I thought you were Headmaster Morgenstern.”

“I took his name along with his post,” he said, eyes aimed above my head.

“How come?”

“It would have been too strange to be addressed only by my first name.”

Confused, I frowned. “Why would they address you by your—oh.”

He had no family name of his own.

“You’re an orphan,” I realized, earlier embarrassment creeping back up.

With a heavy sigh, he extended a hand down to me. “Come. If we must have this conversation, I’d prefer it in private, away from prying ears.”

Never would I have thought that I’d ever willingly take his hand.

But I did.

CHAPTER TEN

Dark had settled across the hidden valley Mondsee Academy was nestled in, and night had unfurled its starry bedspread as one by one, the lit windows dimmed.

From this spot on the roof, the place Dietrich had chosen to have our conversation, I could survey a stretch of land close to what I'd witnessed as a swan.

"I don't think I'll ever forget what that felt like," I said, midway through him telling me of the first time he'd turned his arms into wings. "I'm still angry at you for that, by the way."

"I know," he said, silky hair blowing in the breeze, a rich brown in the starlight. "I spent ages livid with my instructor after he kicked me off this very roof."

"What?" I exclaimed, a bit too loudly.

"When I first attempted to turn into a giant owl. Part of the shapeshifting course was to be able to make use of the enchantment." He said it with casual ease, as if he were describing learning to boil eggs. "You were docked points if your achievement was merely visual. It had to be functional as well."

I blinked at him, wide-eyed.

"Professor Dahl wanted me to prove I could make use of the wings and ordered me to fly. I said I couldn't, so he forced me to try."

"By kicking you off the roof?" I squeaked.

He hummed his confirmation, his bright blue eyes gleaming his mirth at my shock.

"And you flew?"

"No." Dietrich leaned back against the slope of the roof, crossing one long leg over the other, pointing at its shin. "I broke my leg. It took a few more attempts, and fractures"—he pointed all over both his legs, *and* his arms and chest—"for me to fly, then to turn into a full owl."

I squawked, outraged. "My ballet teacher may have been ruthless, but she wasn't murderous!"

"No? So how did you acquire your limp?" he asked, brows raised. "I'm certain that was there before we were acquainted."

At the mention, my right leg stiffened and my ankle throbbed as I experienced a brief yet intense flashback to that agonizing incident.

Constant as the reminder of chronic pain and limitation was, I did my best to not think of it. Of how much it had hurt not just to fall, but to realize too late that something had gone terribly wrong and that I was powerless to stop it. The fast-sinking horror that preceded the full spread of the white-hot pain, the hideous knowledge that it could be the last time I truly danced.

A different kind of sadness than the one shrouding me over my current situation overtook me. Older, familiar, but it held the same weight in my mind.

"Did I offend you?" he asked, his voice suddenly soft and hushed.

"No, it's just…" I hugged my legs to my chest, resting my chin on one knee. "It's stupid, and unreasonable, but I think the only thing that ever upset me as much as this mess I'm in was when I stopped dancing."

"Why do you consider it stupid?"

"Because it was a hobby, a passion, not a duty, not my purpose in life, not my birthright that was masterminded away from me," I blurted out, choking up. "And it was my fault."

I heard him move and raised my head to find us almost nose to nose.

A slow puff of air, not quite a gasp, trailed out my mouth as I felt myself drawn in even closer to him without intending to move.

Everything about him was just infuriatingly soothing: his voice, his manner of speech, his trustworthy face, his very aura, and most of all, his amazing blue eyes.

They didn't even lose their color in this dimness, nor could they be mistaken for any other shade. Still, they weren't light enough to be cold and unnerving like those glaciers back home. If anything, they were the perfect shade of blue, no hint of grey or green, a northern sea, a morning sky, a distant star.

"Tell me what happened." His murmur was gentle, his warm breath fanning the hair at my temple.

"Why? You haven't told me much in this 'private' conversation," I said defensively as I pulled back to glare at him. "What did you bring me out here for? You going to shove me off the roof as well?"

"No need, you already managed to fly by yourself." It was said like a joke, but it lacked his usual sarcasm. "But I'll trade you a story for a story, one of equal weight."

"Careful with that offer," I murmured, entranced by his gaze, which grew brighter as the night got darker. "Mine won't be as interesting as yours."

"I'm not fishing for entertainment." He moved back until his broad upper body filled my vision. "That would have to wait for whatever our performing arts teacher has in store this year."

My hammering heart blipped with surprise. "You hold performances here?"

"I can't guarantee they'll be as good as whatever you participated in, but it is a good exercise in cooperation and artistic expression," he said, pride evident in his gaze and tone. "Dancers, singers, instrumentalists, artists and craftspeople among the student body all come together to put on two shows a year."

I sat up, energized by his enthusiasm. "Don't those shows earn income, or garner donations? Our performances did, for charities at least."

"They used to, but it has become too risky to invite anyone but parents and alumni to attend." His animation died down as he looked down towards the forest I'd fled into my first night here. "So I had to find another way to procure funds."

"Oh," I whispered, my heart fluttering now. "Can I ask why this change occurred?"

Out the corner of his eye, he caught me staring at him and turned his own gaze at me, a lighter gleam reentering it. "Is that what you want in exchange for your story?"

Despite the civility of our current interaction, I still didn't know what to make of him or what he'd told me.

On one hand, he was a sorcerer with a feared reputation who was commissioned by the wealthy to do questionable, if not terrible things, and was my abductor. On the other, he used the acquired

funds to run this school, and had spared me from his contractor's death sentence.

Half devious, half noble, all confounding. What would I consider such a person?

I exhaled my confusion, belatedly answering his question. "Yes."

"Very well." He rolled his shoulders, then his neck, releasing tension with loud pops, like he did while transforming. "I was brought here as a child by my mother, who was also a sorceress. I can barely remember her, or where we were before, but Wilhelm—the previous Headmaster Morgenstern—told me enough during my apprenticeship."

I gaped at him. "She just—left you here?"

"Yes, she was—" He stopped, as if reconsidering his words, before he continued in what seemed like a totally different tangent. "The performances I mentioned, were not held here, of course, but at major venues in some of the northern and western kingdoms. They were held for patrons, some of whom were nobility and even royalty. During one performance, such a patron was the king of Lyonesse."

That immediately made me think of Siegfried, and my heart clenched. "I thought Lyonesse disapproved of sorcery."

He huffed a sarcastic laugh. "That's the understatement of the millennium. But Lyonesse didn't always 'disapprove.' It was Ludwig's Orcagian queen who brought her hatred of sorcery to her new court, and didn't appreciate being obligated to attend a fundraiser event benefiting sorcerers. Particularly one I was a part of."

Remembering how he'd referred to her as an evil hag, a frown etched itself into my brow. "What did you do that upset her?"

With a heavy exhale, leaving a cigar-smoke trail of vapor, Dietrich said, "I had the audacity of looking more like her husband than her own son did."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The worst thing was, the moment he mentioned it, I could suddenly see it.

As a sign of alliance between Opona and Lyonesse, a portrait of King Ludwig hung in our palace halls, in a place of honor where dignitaries were received. And though its subject had since deteriorated to an unrecognizable version of his likeness, I could now see the portrait's uncanny resemblance to the man before me.

Save for the longer hair and the vibrancy of his eyes—and the fact that they literally glowed at times—Dietrich did look more like the King of Lyonesse than his former heir did.

To be plain, the sorcerer was Siegfried's half-brother.

As if to confirm my conclusion, Dietrich went on, voice dripping in bitter sarcasm, "From the moment she saw me, Queen Corisande instantly knew that I was the son of the court's former magician and her husband's mistress, whom she'd banished from court five years before she finally managed to provide the king with an heir. She developed an immediate paranoia that I would one day return and swindle her precious firstborn's birthright from under him. She insisted I would either curse him to make him unfit to rule, or raise an army of I-don't-know-what to strong-arm him into relinquishing his throne. I was only eight at the time."

"She really got all of that from your resemblance to her husband?"

"And from my father showing great favor towards me during their visit, praising my power and performance. But it was inviting me to spend the winter holidays with them a few years later, when his pride and fascination with his legitimate son had waned, that made her declare war. She took that as an insult and a threat, and accused me of bewitching the king."

My jaw didn't quite drop, but it twitched uncontrollably as the fragments of his story began to fit together. "Is…is that why magic was banned in that part of the realm?"

Dietrich hummed his confirmation. "With that new anti-magic law in effect in Lyonesse and Orcage, it spread to the rest of the other kingdoms. It infected those who didn't adopt it out right, like Opona, and socializing with and employing sorcerers became social and political suicide. That meant no attendances of our performances, no donations, no employment. And from then on it progressed to all-out persecution."

"That's why you hide the school's existence, why you now want to bring back the need for household magicians," I concluded, feeling lightheaded. "And why you take jobs cursing people."

"Along with taking commissions for breaking curses, ending hauntings, creating wards." He counted on his fingers, voice ranging from disaffected boredom to world-weary exhaustion. "I also do

birthdays."

A hint of a laugh tickled my chest, coming off as more of a cough. "Entertaining, or cursing children?"

He shrugged. "I do it for free if the child is an abominable brat."

I waited for the punchline. "You're joking, right?"

He said nothing, prompting goosebumps to storm across my arms as I remembered just who I was sitting alongside.

"How would you rationalize something like that?" I choked.

"By having no personal feelings whatsoever about what I was paid to do," he said evenly. "Desperation leaves no room for guilt."

"Curse the parents if you must. As adults, they might have earned the ire of whoever hired you—but children are innocent!"

"My innocence was never taken into account when I was banished from my father's home before I was born," he snapped, the glow of his eyes intensifying. "Or when I was abandoned by my mother when I was no longer a boon but a burden to her. Or when I was used as an excuse to further Corisande's and her people's agenda against magic, and to legalize hunting them down, long after witch-burnings had been criminalized."

His voice rang out into the quiet night, echoing within my ribcage and amplifying my already hammering heartbeat.

"But yes, I was joking. I draw the line at children."

My chest deflated with relief at his mumbled qualification. At least he didn't go around cursing babies. But with this concern out of the way, the import of what he'd said registered.

When I'd heard of people's distaste or distrust of magic and those who wielded it, it was always on the basis that they were dangerous, with far too many examples given to count. I'd never given much thought to the veracity of such accounts, but had considered that a lot of them had to be true, for such generalized and firm views to have been formed. I'd thought I'd had my own confirmation when Dietrich had turned me into a swan and abducted me.

But to learn it had only taken one person in power to outlaw it across most of the northern lands and restart the hunting of its practitioners was a shock. It was truly disturbing that one woman's hatred and fear of a child, him, had gone all the way to affect how magic was practiced and its practitioners were treated in my own kingdom.

The fear was, from a certain point of view, understandable, but when taking what I'd heard about Siegfried's mother, and what Dietrich had told me about her into account, it just came off as extreme self-serving vindictiveness. Not to mention a horrifying abuse of power.

The realization made me begin to draw my own conclusions about the rest of the strange things about that family. "Did the king pass over Siegfried for his brother to spite his wife?"

He stared at me for a long moment before inclining his head. "Is that the story he gave you?"

Something about the way he'd phrased that question unsettled me. And it wasn't just the scoffing tone.

It made me retort defensively, "No. Why?"

Dietrich wagged his finger at me, his sculpted lips quirking. "Our deal was one story for another. Now it's your turn."

"I'm afraid mine will be anticlimactic after your own. There are no court conspiracies or international subterfuge involved."

"That you know of," he added, sounding stuffy, like he wasn't breathing properly.

It might have been another one of his taunting jabs, or it could have been like his brief tirade about innocence, too serious to stomach. The implications that hung over the latter made my insides tremble sickeningly, but I didn't want to consider it.

Unable to handle the possibility that was worming its way past my ears and into my mind, carried by the tune of his voice as it echoed along the memories of music and mistakes, of missteps and misery, I stood.

There was no objection to my retreat. He joined me, beckoning me back into his personal quarters, where the fireplace had been lit.

As I watched him head to a tray laden with a cake and a tea-set for two, I debated how to start. He gestured for me to take a seat on one of the facing violet velvet sofas, but I remained standing.

Chest tight, I began, "Like your own charity performances, there was a program arranged at the Royal Opera House, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of my father's reign, and give back to the realm. I was the lead in the ballet that night, *The Golden Apple*, in the role of Idonea, the Groundskeeper of the Gods, who was…" I trailed off, having run out of breath.

"Kidnapped by the fairy king, then rescued by a human prince, whom she married," he finished for me. "She finally left him when he began to age and she remained the same, and returned to her Golden Garden." After a pause, his lips twisted. "Is there a rule against happy endings in the stories adapted to song and stage?"

"There are also comedies. But it's the tragedies that stay with people long after the laughter had faded."

He hummed disapprovingly as he offered me a teacup that smelled of camomile and lavender. "That seems to be true of most narratives, historical or mythical. I find it hard to understand why."

"Your line of work is typically the source of such tragic narratives," I fired back, hands shaking and rattling my cup. "Curses, hexes, punishing enchantments or even prophecies that tear families and nations apart from within."

A chuckle rumbled past his bared teeth, lips pulled back in an ambiguous smile.

I'd say he was amused if it weren't for the hollowness of the noise itself, the fake laugh I was all too familiar with. Equal parts pretense and irritation, forced out of one's throat to appease someone making an oblivious comment or a crude joke about something devastating.

But this was one situation where there was no use for feigning feelings.

"What?" I snapped.

"Oh, I just love how powerful we sorcerers are as a group. Always scheming for the worst outcomes and mining for cruel entertainment by making you poor, defenseless, benevolent humans turn on each other."

Hiding behind the cup, I took a slow sip, mulling over how to respond. This sounded like the kind of boast the sorcerers of stories would make, jeering down at the hero on his horse while holding his captive princess out like bait.

But there was no one to taunt here, and Siegfried certainly wasn't coming for me.

Exhaling, I lowered the teacup, returning his intent gaze. "What are you implying here? That your kind never did anything wrong?"

"No, that's what *you're* doing."

When I had no immediate response, Dietrich dropped onto one of the velvet sofas. He threw one arm along its back, crossed his legs with graceful ease, his cloak falling open to reveal a white drawstring shirt, almost fully undone. Firelight cast dimensional shadows and a polished gleam to his powerful chest muscles and a glimpse of taut abdominals.

Feeling my face heat up, I snatched my gaze back to my tea as I shakily raised it to my lips. “I never said people were pure, innocent creatures.”

“But you think that sorcerers aren’t people, with our own variety of personalities. That we exist to make you all miserable.”

I gulped down a mouthful of tea that nearly went down the wrong pipe before I rasped, “You can’t blame me for thinking that. My only experience with magic has been quite unpleasant.”

“That goes doubly for my experience with royalty.” He shrugged off his cloak and ran his hands through his hair, drawing my gaze like a magnet to the movements of his nimble fingers.

Feeling more irritated at my involuntary responses to his every nuance, I shot back, “Royalty don’t pose a threat to those who can do magic.”

“Really? Our conversation outside just evaporated from your head?”

I shut my mouth firmly, lips clinging to the rim of the teacup as I observed him, trying to focus on his face rather than any other part of him. I still couldn't help noticing the way his hair undulated around his face in loose waves that shone like burnished bronze in this light. Or the way its thick ends pooled on his broad shoulders that stretched even the loose material of his shirt.

Heat spread further across my skin, and it had nothing to do with the fireplace at my back.

Why was I thinking of him in such a way? He wasn’t Siegfried, or any of the young men who’d been presented to me as potential consorts. He was the man who had ruined my life, taken hold of its one loose string, and unraveled the tapestry I’d been weaving…

Except that wasn’t entirely true. No matter how hard I wanted to hate him, the gutting revelations were too prominent in my mind now, crushing the defiant doubts about his character beneath their weight.

An irritated grumble snapped my attention back to him. He had readjusted his position, long, powerful limbs loosening into a more relaxed placement, head propped back in one hand as his fingertips massaged his temples.

“Look, I don’t want to argue, nor do I want to hear about how I’m evil incarnate at the moment.” He gestured to the sofa before him. “Please, take a seat and tell me what we came in here to discuss.”

“What’s the point?” I said tiredly. “Obviously your attempts to endear yourself to me have failed.”

“That wasn’t my intention.” He now massaged his brows, turning his head further to stretch his neck, baring his strong throat and the sharp cut of his jaw, defined despite the dense, trimmed beard. “And I don’t believe you find me as monstrous as you claim.”

Embarrassment nipped at my edges, making me straighten with worry that he had seen the way my eyes had trailed over him. “What makes you say that?”

His lips twisted as his eyes twinkled up at me. “We’ve had a very civil, companionable day, and I would go as far as saying you’ve enjoyed my company. If it wasn’t for the circumstances, I’d say we’d have gotten on swimmingly.”

“It’s not like I had any other choice but to be civil,” I retorted, my heat rising until I was certain my face was a blazing crimson. “I’ve already learned there’s no point in attempting to escape, or attack you.”

“No, but you could have continued being hostile, or even used what I’ve told you against me.”

“What? How you don’t let your morals get in the way of the magic you hire out?”

He shook his head slightly on the back on the couch, spreading his gleaming coppery hair against it as he murmured, “How I came to be in this world and in this situation to begin with.”

Taken aback, I gasped, “That was out of your hands! There is no way I could blame you for it.”

“And yet most people did, and created paranoid scenarios of what I’d become, saddling me with

the worst traits imaginable because of what I am, and because my father wouldn't deign to legitimize me. Safe to say, I'd been viewed with fear and disgust long before I became the sorcerer that sets all those tragic or heroic stories in motion."

"I'm not most people," I assured him. "I've been raised to rule, to judge people based on their actions and allegiances, to be fair in my judgements."

"That's a lovely sentiment, but those who claim to be neutral are some to the most biased." His eyes suddenly grew somber. "Yes, your experience with me is justifiably upsetting, but you shouldn't hold it against everyone else in this castle."

"I don't," I swore urgently.

He quirked a disbelieving brow at me. "What happened to 'your kind are responsible for all tragedy?'"

"I meant that in a general sense."

Dietrich huffed a mirthless laugh. "As if this is any better."

I shifted uncomfortably. "All right, I misspoke out of frustration. Is that what you want to hear?"

"You could have left the last part out if you wanted to appear sincere." Earlier amusement had crept back into his tone, assuring me that he wasn't upset with me. "But my point was, normally I'd expect more accusations of meddling or destruction. I'm surprised you haven't considered me being the reason Siegfried was stripped of his birthright."

That was a good point. It hadn't even occurred to me.

Not sure why it hadn't, I tried to rationalize it, to myself first. "I guess—if you wanted to work your magic in that direction, we wouldn't be here. You'd have had Ludwig legitimizing you and placing you above Alberich and Siegfried in succession, as his eldest, and you would have been the new crown prince of Lyonesse. You could have undone all of the damage Corisande did to you and other sorcerers."

The corner of his mouth curled up slightly in both bitterness and self-deprecation. "Can't say I haven't thought of it."

"Why haven't you done it?" I asked, genuinely curious. "You could have solved all your problems with a snap of your fingers."

"I'd tell you, but then you'd owe me two personal stories." He gestured to the seat near him on the sofa this time. "Please, sit. This much standing can't be good for your leg."

He was right. But sitting this close to him wasn't a good idea. I didn't need to breathe in his alluring fiery scent on top of everything else.

I came closer only to set down my empty cup. "It's not like it'll get any better or worse. I'm stuck like this."

He shook his head as he persisted, "Things can always get worse, so there's no reason to tempt them in that direction. And even if your condition remains the same, it doesn't mean you shouldn't pursue relief, no matter how transient they might be."

Forced to admit I needed it, I finally sat down beside him, my vision suddenly swimming.

This was getting to be too much. It wasn't enough that he'd revealed himself to be an unlikely savior from my sister's murderous envy, as well as someone with a sympathetic history and cause. He had to be considerate, too, making it even harder to direct any hatred towards him.

Wound up, I couldn't help blurting out, "Why are you being nice to me all of the sudden?"

He looked taken aback for a second, before his expression shuttered and he drawled, "Why do you think?"

"Do you pity me? Is that it?" I sought out his eyes, mine filling, lips trembling. "Or is it possible

that, for once, you feel guilty for ruining a life?"

"Could be one or the other, or both," he murmured, eyes lowering. "Or neither."

"Neither? What else is there?"

He turned fully to me, held out his hand, his face lit half by the flames and half by the starlight, the contrasting temperature of light reflecting the warm amber of his hair, and the cool blue of his irises.

Hesitantly, I set my palm over his, so small in comparison. Then it was hidden under his other hand in a gentle hold, and he began to stroke. "Perhaps it's sympathy."

A spark lit an electrified trail under my arm. I shuddered as the world narrowed down to this room, all awareness to the space between us, and all sensations to the soothing drag of his palm over my knuckles, of having my hand between those that could do the unthinkable.

There was a shameful thrill to it, that these powerful, dangerous hands could do the worst to me, rob me of my mind and body, turn me into a waterbird, a statue, a mindless thrall or something far more grotesque. Yet they showed no hint of such a threat, just a simple display of kindness I hadn't earned.

"Why sympathize with me?" I whispered, voice unsteady. "You said you didn't concern yourself with your jobs, that you removed your feelings from the task."

"I find myself incapable of doing so in your case." His breathing seemed to pick up to match my own agitation. "We are both the star-crossed children of kings, stripped of our birthright and displaced onto dangerous, uncharted destinies by venomous women, be it my stepmother or your sister. I can't help but feel for you."

Swallowing down the urge to sob, I still sounded choked up. "I didn't believe you about anything at first, but I now feel like you wouldn't lie to me."

"There's no point. I'm a lot of things, but not dishonest. And —" He stopped abruptly, ceasing his caress of my hand.

"And what?" I couldn't help the tremor in my voice as I prompted.

After a long, conflicted moment, he exhaled. We'd somehow gotten so close I could feel his warm, clean breath on my hairline. "I feel that you might be the only one in the world who could understand me."

Siegfried had said that same thing the night Dietrich had taken me away from my old life. It should sound like a total, manipulative falsehood coming from him. So why did it sound far more sincere coming from Dietrich?

It made me give in to the urge to meet his eyes head on.

The look in them was scarily unguarded in a way I feared mine were.

Unprompted and undeserved, he'd bared so much of himself to me in an effort to connect. But I couldn't bring myself to do the same. At least not yet.

Not knowing how to answer, afraid of what I'd say if I started talking, I instead promised, "Tomorrow. I'll give you my story tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Next morning, I awoke in a proper room for the first time since my arrival at Castle Mondsee to the noise of the students who shared my walls. But mainly to a drowsy preoccupation with one question that hovered over me like a cloud.

What do I do now?

That cloud grew heavy and dark as I exited my room and trailed down the spiral staircase. Catching bits and pieces of the conversations from the rowdy students who rushed around me, I ran everything we'd discussed yesterday with them in mind.

This castle was full of children and young adults who depended on Dietrich to keep them safe and provided for, even after they'd aged out of the school system.

And he'd offered me a job to help prepare them for the world beyond this sanctuary.

The cloud released crackling lightning when I arrived at the wide-open double doors of the teachers' lounge, the smell of fresh coffee and baked goods wafting out.

The teachers were arranged around tables, eating and reviewing what must be today's lessons. The idea of joining them knotted my stomach in tension. It might be interpreted as acceptance of the position he'd offered me.

As I limped past the lounge, they suddenly quieted down, all eyes trained on me. I was hoping they wouldn't try to engage me, when an older woman rushing out towards me.

She had silvery eyes that matched hair held firm in a bun with a bejeweled comb—and she had her arms held out. I received the hug before I could even consider how odd this was.

"Um, hello?" I greeted, confused.

"I don't know what you did, but keep it up if you can," she said happily. "I don't think I've ever seen him this relaxed before."

It took me a minute to get what she meant. I'd barely opened my mouth to ask for further explanation when the door across the hall opened, revealing Dietrich.

Silhouetted against the light from his office, he beckoned me with a curl of his fingers. "Thank you, Mathilda, I'll take her from here."

Excusing myself with a nervous smile, I headed towards him. My last glance back as he shut the door showed me the teachers grouping together to gossip.

He ushered me to a breakfast table with a gentle hand on my elbow, making me even unsteadier on my feet.

I almost collapsed on the chair he pulled back for me before I asked, "What was that about?"

I barely detected a quick eye roll as Dietrich sat across from me, a flick of his wrist urging me to eat. “Pay them no mind.”

“She thanked me for you being in a good mood.” I reached for a juice glass as I surveyed him over the bouquet centering the table: grape hyacinths, pansies and violets. Taking in the rest of the decor, it appeared he had a favorite color. “I would have thought I’d given you grief rather than relief.”

He swore something vehement under his breath, pale cheeks darkening with a flush, his knife scraping too loudly against the toast he was buttering. “I’m not smiling at any of them ever again.”

A sudden giggle at his chagrin had me almost spitting out my apple juice. “That would be good for your fearsome reputation.”

He raised his eyes as if horrified at the suggestion. “Lord von Rothbart has no place within these walls.”

My smile died as I watched him with the uncertainty from earlier returning. “Do they know? I got the feeling that Nurse Imelda did.”

“Some are privy to the lengths I go to in order to keep this place afloat,” he said tightly. “Whatever their feelings on the matter are, I don’t want to hear it.”

“You heard plenty from me.”

“That’s different.”

“How so?”

“You were venting, and you don’t work for me.”

“Yet.”

Dietrich’s eyes flitted to meet mine so fast I could have sworn they flashed…no, they actually did. “Are you considering my offer?”

“I’m trying to figure out what to do with myself. But I…” The choked-up feeling from last night resurged, stopping firm in my throat like I had swallowed a plum whole.

“But what?”

There was no point in me withholding my true feelings. I’d slung enough of them his way yesterday.

It still felt hard to breathe as I admitted, “It feels too much like giving up. That I just gave in to the fate Lina chose for me, and I haven’t even fought enough to be this defeated.”

“You’ve fought plenty, and she nearly had you killed for it,” he reminded me. “But I understand why you feel that way.”

“How? What have you given up on?”

He set down his utensils, threading his fingers to set his chin atop them, observing me, a teasing gleam intensifying the blue of his eyes. “You know, you keep fishing for answers when you’ve yet to provide me enough of your own in exchange.”

There was no shaking him off, was there? “I just told you something that’s deeply private.”

He waved my mumbling away. “One doesn’t need to be a mind reader to know you’re conflicted about what to do.”

I sat forward in my chair, leveling my gaze on his challengingly. “All right, since you can empathize so much, what would you do if you were in my position?”

“It’s quite impossible for me to be so,” he dismissed. “If anyone tried to usurp and impersonate me, I’d hex them into the next century.”

I suppressed a groan. “Humor me.”

Dietrich held his chin between his fingertips, drumming them lightly as he mulled over my

request. “I’d weigh my options, judge whether the effort to take back my life is worth more than making the best of my situation.”

This sounded more like what he wanted me to do, not what he would do. Thankfully, I hadn’t sunk so far into hopelessness to accept that with no struggle.

I was Aventina Lebedeva, future Tsarina of Opona, and I wasn’t going to give up my birthright without a fight—physical or otherwise.

Until I figured out how to do that, I’d humor him. It was in my best interest.

If he was as lonely as he claimed to be, perhaps I could wear him down. Sway his sympathy to my goal to return home.

In the silence that spread between us, he exhaled and ran a hand through his hair, combing it to one side with these long, magic-wielding fingers. The sunlight pouring from the nearby window gleamed along the silky waves, highlighting the way the new parting framed his face.

A move so simple shouldn’t have made my breath catch in my throat, but somehow, rearranging his hair brought out another side of him. He was still the same man with the sad, sharp, sky-blue eyes who managed to look both kind and daunting. Yet the side parting further accentuated his chiseled cheekbones, showed off the rugged cut of his jaw, underlining the fact that he wasn’t handsome. He was way more. Magnetic, complex…singular. Everything his conventionally good-looking half-brother wasn’t…

What was I thinking? How could I be reminded of Siegfried, the prince I’d been hoping to return to, only to find him wanting in the comparison with his rogue sibling? Even worse, to realize the hope of reuniting with him had been dimming with every passing second in Dietrich’s company?

Either the painkiller potion Imelda had prescribed me had some very curious side effects, or I was somehow becoming enamored with this sorcerer.

“It all boils down to whether seeking out something is worth the trouble to you,” he reiterated, rousing me from the distressing tangent my musings had veered on. “Without me, your sister is still conniving, resourceful and vicious. She must have contingency plans for the next time you try returning.”

My heart clenched. “Like what?”

He shrugged with a disdainful curl of his lips. “The most obvious is an assassin posted at the gate, with orders to shoot you on sight. But from the lengths she’s gone to so far to hide her tracks, she would resort to more elaborate and untraceable methods. Like a gargoyle that would animate at your approach, and sweep you off to drop you into the ocean. Or a distortion enchantment to alter your appearance to that of a known assassin, so you’d be captured and hung. Maybe even a trap set to fill with flesh-melting poison gas targeting your body in specific, based on hair from your brush.”

The gruesome images streaked through my mind with horror and disbelief that Lina would go that far. But by now it tore me apart to admit that she would. Gleefully.

It felt as if I swallowed the plum I’d felt blocking my throat as I rasped painfully, “Oddly specific scenarios. Have you done such things?”

If I was expecting an apologetic expression, I was wrong. If anything, he became smug. “Not much I wouldn’t do for the right price or incentives.”

Feeling bold, I pushed aside the flower vase to get a clearer look at him. “What *wouldn’t* you do, no matter the price?”

He flexed his fingers, releasing faint sparks. “Blanket curses that indiscriminately harm groups of people, or even an entire city or land. Anything involving children, killing innocents, and altering the mental state of anyone in any way.” He met my eyes, exhaling through his nostrils heavily, as if in

exasperation at his own self-inflicted restrictions. “The latter was why I had to resort to such convoluted measures with you. It would have been easier to just”—He worked his fingers near his temple, mimicking magical mental control—“give your father the idea that he should replace you with your sister, and send you abroad to marry a duke or a prince, and that would have been that.”

Somehow, that relaxed me. That he had limits, and good reasons for them, that he wouldn’t start wars or control others like puppets. But regardless, he still acted as the tool that helped many a conspirator achieve their goals.

I sighed heavily. “It seems that no matter what you did, it would have ended with me away from home against my will.”

His gaze lengthened before he said, “Your sister didn’t hire an assassin because murders are complicated, invite scrutiny of those closest to the victim, and always seem to end in exposure. Even if she replaced you and pretended it was her who was killed, a careful examination of your body could have exposed the truth. After much deliberation of every possibility to replace you without repercussions, she decided she needed a sorcerer to transform you before he killed you—the perfect crime with no evidence left behind that it had even happened.”

Every word felt like a red-hot skewer being turned in my gut. Renewed shock reverberated in my being, at the sheer diabolical evil of someone who, for all her faults, I’d always considered a part of myself. While she’d considered me an obstacle to be removed, a redundancy to be wiped out.

I could only stare numbly at Dietrich, my agony worsening at what I saw filling his eyes. Regret. Compassion.

As if realizing my condition, he said nothing for long moments.

But it seemed he had more to say. His voice softened to a deep whisper when he finally said it. “I was her first choice as the best sorcerer there is. And though I loathed her and the job, I rushed to accept it. If I didn’t, Avelina would have contracted someone else. Someone who would have eagerly killed you for the price she was offering, and for her future favor.”

After another endless moment of suffocating silence, I could only croak, “Why?”

I could see it in his eyes he understood what I was asking. But he looked reluctant to say anymore. Looked sorry he’d said as much.

Then he exhaled heavily. “I told you—I draw the line at killing innocents.”

“You don’t consider royals innocents.”

“I don’t lump every royal with those who hurt me and my people based on their status,” he said, his eyes starting to simmer with a blue-hot fire. “You haven’t done anything to warrant such an end, was a victim of your sister’s sick ambition. I couldn’t let you die, and at the hand of one of my kind, too. It would have been a terrible loss for both our people, and the repercussions”—He shook his head in disgust—“Evil would have won all around.”

Before that blow of an explanation could fully register, he sat forward and pretended to return to his meal with zeal. “Anyway, the school’s midwinter play has started rehearsals. Do you think you might have any advice for the children?”

Taken aback at the sharp swerve in subject, my lashes fluttered in bewilderment until I put together a coherent answer. “How’s that going to help with the ‘court etiquette course’ you wanted me to teach?”

“It isn’t.” He pointed his fork at my plate, urging me to eat, his forced smile a little manic. “Just something I thought you might be interested in.”

Head still clanging with his latest revelations, I stuttered, “I…would like to sit in on a rehearsal first…see how things are.”

“Then you’ll join me at the auditorium after breakfast.”

Suddenly, it was like some door had slammed shut within me. It separated me from all the ugliness he’d just revealed, and ushered me towards something fresh and pure.

I found myself wanting to rush through it at full speed, heard myself blurting out, “Deal!” a little too eagerly.

At that, he quirked his lips in a brief yet dazzling smile, one that conveyed everything from surprise to relief—to anticipation.

Of what? I could only wait and see.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After Dietrich almost detonated my mind relating the full measure of my sister's depravity, breakfast turned out to be a very enjoyable experience.

For one, unlike our previous meal together, I actually ate this time, sampling all the magically transported food he kept piling on the table. I didn't think I could ever eat that amount of poached eggs, broiled sausages, freshly baked brown bread, butter, and mixed-berry jam in one meal. But I did, with gusto.

And all the time, with mouths full, we kept verbally sparring. He kept me engaged and on my mental toes, as if unwilling to leave me a moment to dwell on what he'd told me. He'd even made me splutter with laughter a couple of times.

But keeping that mood became difficult. Not because of anything that had happened in the past, but of what I'd committed to in the near future.

Now nerves bubbled around my stomach, threatening to upend my massive breakfast as we approached the westernmost end of the castle.

I didn't know why the prospect of meeting his students made me more nervous than I'd ever felt interacting with him. Not even in the beginning, when I'd believed him to be an evil sorcerer who would end up cooking me. After all, I had been a student myself not too long ago, if never in a school environment.

To preoccupy myself as I lightly limped after Dietrich down a brief flight of stairs, I let my eyes roam around this section where I hadn't been before. With higher ceilings, an open floor, and doors lining the curved walls, it was bordered by two hallways, where the faint echoes of voices hummed and sharp movements creaked.

Above us was a chandelier lit not by trendy bulbs but by dark-blue candles that emitted the smell of petrichor. Strangely soothing. I wondered how, and why, someone had managed to capture the scent of rain on stone in wax.

Ascending the opposing steps, eyes now on the back of his head, I couldn't resist a chuckle. I didn't question being turned into a waterbird and him shifting into a gigantic owl, but the candle smelling like a rainy day was what baffled me?

He turned to look at me, an enigmatic look in his eyes and a twitch to his lips at my merriment, and my heartbeats stumbled. For a moment I was lost in the compulsion of his gaze and the creeping whimsy of this place. Then the sound of yelling, laughter and music wrenched me from the spell, and I found we were at a set of white double doors, sunlight pouring in from the surrounding cracks.

Dietrich opened the door, bowing me in. "Aventina, may I present to you, the cast and crew of this year's theatre performance."

Light poured into the hallway, and once my eyes adjusted past the threshold, I took in the large room.

Wide windows nearly reached the high ceilings, framing the vista of mountains and trees like a painting, pouring sunlight onto the tan, wooden floorboards, where dozens of students of varying heights and ages milled about. Their reflections in the opposing mirrored wall had initially fooled me into believing the room was larger, fuller, but spotting the sole piano twice broke the illusion.

Heart fluttering, I returned to the moment and found many pairs of eyes watching me, aiming their confusion, curiosity and excitement my way.

The last time I'd been the subject of such attention was the night I'd been robbed of my identity.

Over my shoulder, I found Dietrich watching me as he whispered to the instructor, a woman with dark, greying hair in a lilac dress, leaning on a wooden cane.

His eyes locking with mine, I remembered when I'd first spotted him alongside Lina, and conflict swirled in my gut. If I had pointed out the suspicious figure to the guards, could that night have ended differently?

No, we'd discussed this. If it hadn't been him, she'd have gotten someone else later. She wouldn't have stopped until she got what she wanted. The disdain and malice in her eyes the last time I'd been in a room like this was even more rage-inducing in hindsight.

It was just my luck Dietrich wasn't as evil as his reputation needed him to seem. It was why her plans to be rid of me completely had failed. It was why I was still alive.

But I wasn't only still alive. I was being cared for and treated as a welcome guest and companion. I was invited to partake of life in this place, being valued for my skills and knowledge and potential assistance.

A hand on my elbow pulled me from my thoughts. I found a girl whose head barely reached my shoulder, dark hair in pigtails, brown eyes large and shimmering like a puppy's.

"Are you really a ballerina?" she asked breathlessly.

I'd anticipated she'd ask about me being a princess. Instead, her inquiry was about the part of my identity I'd lost first.

"I was," I said, forcing a smile.

Another girl popped up at my side, freckle-faced, auburn hair pulled back in a tight bun, hazel eyes taking up half her face. "Are you here to help Miss Springborn teach us?"

"Katharina, Heidi, don't bother our guest." Miss Springborn limped over to us, making me wonder if she'd suffered a career-ending injury like I had, and sending a twinge of sympathy vibrating through me as I took her extended hand. "Welcome to our practice room. We're honored to have you here and to hear any opinions or advice you may have."

"And to see you dance!" Heidi added, bouncing up and down by me, pigtails flying.

"Oh, I can't." I stifled a stutter, waving off that request. "I'm just here to observe."

"Why not?" A third student had approached, a boy around Heidi's age who shared a fair amount of her features. "If you're not going to join us, then you shouldn't observe, either. You should wait when we put on a proper rehearsal."

"Heinz!" Miss Springborn hissed her reprimand. "Don't make me give you mirror duty again!"

As the boy opened his mouth to retort, I rushed to warn, "Don't tempt her. My instructor made us polish mirrors over and over until our arms shook."

Heinz, unimpressed and still defiant, retreated sullenly. But now more pairs of eyes watched me

with more intrigue than confusion.

Avoiding all their gazes, I raised my head and immediately locked eyes with Dietrich, who watched me with an unreadable expression. That further kindled the nerves in my gut and added pressure to my chest, like my ribs were being compressed.

Nodding as if we'd exchanged some communication, Dietrich approached, the students parting into neatly arranged lines as every eye followed his movements.

Instinctively, I assumed the worst from this reaction—that this was out of fear, that they were giving him a wide berth to avoid contact or even his attention. But as I watched their faces, I found some watching him with a nervous awe that matched my own, and the rest with giddy anticipation.

It reminded me of when my class and I had followed our instructor's every move. Not for fear of reprimand or of being prodded by her cane, but out of fascination for this living legend who'd come to impart her matchless experience and wisdom to a bunch of clueless little girls.

They didn't fear him, they respected him. More, revered him.

"How about you show us what you have so far, and if Miss Lebedeva is impressed with your performance, she will give you one of her own," Dietrich said, more of a statement than a suggestion.

Then he caught my eye and winked, and I realized he'd given me a way out of this tight spot. I could simply give my advice on their efforts, say they needed more time to practice, and keep sitting, watching.

"I agree with your headmaster," I announced, retreating towards a seat at the end of the room. "Let me see what you have so far."

Like someone had yelled "Fire!" the students burst into motion, rushing in different directions, some even colliding in their haste to reach their stations.

Instruments at the ready, dancers at their positions, singers at the front, props in hand, they waited for the signal.

Miss Springborn came to sit by me and called out, "From the top!"

A simmering sensation filled the room as the first notes were played and starting steps were taken. But it was when the lead singer fastened her voice onto the music that I saw the first stirrings of something special.

Transformations accompanied the progression of the performance, the students turning the props into scepters, swords, shields and staves, and overlaying their training clothes in comet-tails of shimmering, golden light. An accompanying illusion to their rehearsal, a hint of what was to come on the stage.

It was the spellbinding effect of a great live performance, but with the help of true magic.

I watched them move around each other, lips between their teeth, frowns of concentration etched on their sweating brows, anxious to keep up with the rest and fumbling their steps. Some singers were running out of breath, leading to words being skipped or movements being delayed, and the musicians kept glancing at the cast, thrown off by the small disruptions to their joint efforts.

They had yet to reach the stage of effortless synchronicity, the implicit trust in one's cast members that erased the nerves and tension. They were still too worried about coordination and missteps that came from the lack thereof.

The tightness in my chest had eased up, allowing me to take in deeper breaths, small gasps of wonderment at the enthusiastic amateurishness of it all. It cracked open my memory vault to unveil not painful associations, but flashes back to when I did this with my classmates and friends.

Nostalgia rushed through my blood, unbinding the tension keeping me firm in my place, and made me warm with both delight and an urge to cry.

Dietrich had come to lean against the wall by me, crossing his arms. I could hear him humming along to the music, foot tapping with the beat. It was hard not to keep sneaking glances at him, see what he thought of the sprinkling of enchantments and the earnestness of his students.

Before I could make it a question, he beat me to it. "What do you think so far?"

It took me a moment to compose myself before I said, "They're passionate, but in need of much more practice and to learn how to balance the requirements of a performance."

One arched eyebrow rose in interest. "Which are?"

"To ignore the audience and focus more on doing their part independent of those not in their section. To weigh the need to be aware of those around them with focusing more on themselves."

"You should tell them that," he said softly, something unreadable permeating his glance, making my heart speed up even more.. "It would mean a lot coming from someone who performed in the Royal Oponan Theatre."

The intended compliment landed like a stone in a pond, its melancholy ripples tainting the glimmers of fond memories with longing.

"What is it?" His voice thrummed with concern as he leaned closer, smelling like fresh tea leaves and petrichor.

Combined with the way the light hit his eyes at this angle, giving his vivid irises a crystalline glimmer and his tawny hair a golden sheen, he became the soothing embodiment of one of my favorite things: curling up in a window seat with a cup of tea to watch an oncoming rainstorm, while stray sunlight peeked between the clouds, hitting the golden spires of palace domes.

Sighing, I forced myself to look away from him and back to the performance. "I wish I could join them."

"Why don't you?"

I carefully rolled my right ankle. "You know why."

"You don't need to do what you did before," he suggested hurriedly. "No leaps or pirouettes or whatever it is your brand of dancer does. Just…" He looked towards the performance, the tempo winding down to a slower transition. "…do what you can."

The lead singer seemed to have heard us, the softer shift in music and a stretch without singing allowing her to eavesdrop. She swayed closer, holding out her hand to me.

The excitement shimmering in her teal eyes smothered my objection before it could reach my throat, and I let her drag me up and into the dancers' space.

Somehow, after all that singing, she still had air in her lungs to ramble at me, telling me her name was Amalia, that she was fourteen, that she'd gone to the ballet with her parents last year and wanted to see me do a pirouette.

"I haven't warmed up—or danced—in ages!" I blurted out in a shaky rush.

"It doesn't have to be anything extreme, just show me a little—" She wiggled her fingers at me in circles, squeaking with excitement. "You know?"

From my prior experience with the fascination children had with dancers and acrobats, I knew they always wanted to see the moves that defied gravity. My rustiness, as well as my ankle, would not allow that risk.

The music shifted into a different piece, and the dancers' pace slowed as they stuck to a single spot, the choreography becoming centralized as the beat softened, allowing the strings and piano to take center stage.

I recognized this piece. It was never part of our performances, only practice. An accompanying tune to the days where we focused on the slow precision of our craft—no leaps, no jumps, no mid-air

tricks. Just controlled steps with flowing arm movements and fluttering en pointe.

At that thought, I rose onto the balls of my feet, the flat shoes bending to accommodate me. Testing the waters.

The simple move had me overwhelmed with a spark of pain and dread. Then a rush of frustration washed out all other sensation, and I toed off my shoes and decided to just *try*.

It wasn't like I had anything left to lose.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Madame Agrafina had always said that to be a dancer was to both surrender to your body and keep it controlled. To leave all that troubled you far away from the stage, and have only space between your ears for the music that filled them, and for the moves that rode along them like a ship on waves.

Yet it was one particular saying of hers that had followed me wherever I went, making my ruined condition far worse than it should be. *As the swimmer's domain is the sea, the dancer's is the air.*

But since injuring my leg, I had become no more than a grounded bird, stuck staring up at the sky as everything from moths to mallards to intact ballerinas flew free and joyous above and around me.

Now I kept my gaze on level with the those still earthbound by inexperience dancing alongside me. The trilling of a violin and cello, along with the raindrop-like notes of a harp and the shimmering tone of chimes, set a wondrous scene for me.

Eyes half-closed, lost in the fantasy, I retread into the past. Twelve years old, dancing one of the principal roles in the wintertime favorite, *The Music Box*. A tale of an enchanted gift given to the main character in the event of his grandfather's passing. Opening it at the chime of midnight—a clocktower prop rung by the orchestra—swallowed him into the magical world of the fey.

I had been given the role of the Rosebud Fairy, who accompanied him through the glittery rotating sets, after Lina had dragged her feet through practice and talked back to our instructor.

Crystals had hung from the rafters that night, catching the light like icicles in the early morning sun, reflecting flashes of color in the midst of a frost-blue, silver and white stage. Then I'd had my first costume change, where my partner, Kasimir, had pulled on the end of my dress, unraveling it to reveal a flowing magenta gown, signifying the end of winter with Rosebud blooming.

It was the only time I had ever worn a color that vibrant. The color Lina had worn when she had ordered my demise at Siegfried's hands. Such shades were considered crass by high society, but oh, it was lovely. I'd felt like a giant fuchsia blooming in a frosted landscape.

Leaning my weight on my left leg, I attempted an arabesque, stretching my arm and leg out to form a straight line. From there I lowered back into the starting position, a tendu, arms out to my sides and right leg directly behind me, toes barely brushing the floor.

Breathing in and out carefully, pushing away the thought that I was being watched by dozens of pairs of eyes, I attempted a fouetté.

My left ankle, while healthy, was stiff from lack of stretching and warm-up. But I still rose on the balls of my foot in an imitation of en pointe to whip my right leg around and bend it along with my

arms.

Hesitation stifled my momentum.

When I stumbled, I opened my eyes with a startled gasp, and my jaw dropped at the sight that greeted me.

The vision in my memory had come to life, overtaking the practice room in a realistic setting of a wintery forest.

The windows were frosted and the ceiling had become a cloudy sky that sprinkled light snow down on us, fading before it could touch my outstretched hands.

"How?" I turned in place, breathless with awe, then I caught Dietrich smiling softly at me.

He'd done this.

Suddenly, it didn't matter how he'd done it. It mattered that he had. For me.

Thrilled, and feeling bolder than I had in ages, I attempted another move. Not a fouetté, but a pirouette, on my left leg, slow and controlled. When I achieved it smoothly, I did a few more in a row, each faster than the one before until I settled into a steady rotation.

With each turn, I saw Dietrich grow closer and closer. He stopped just outside my range of movement, as if testing my precision, or maybe telling me I'd done enough for now.

As if my body agreed, my pirouette lost momentum, and my stop was less graceful than I intended, having grown a tad dizzy. He caught me by the waist before I could fumble my return to the starting position, and my hands went for his shoulders.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asked, a glimmer of indulgent amusement in his eyes.

The sensation of his hands on me, fingers encircling my waist like a second set of ribs, thumbs over my stomach, filled me with a buzz. Not one of gut-twisting fear, but the soft scintillating of sparkling wine, fizzy bubbles of delight rising within me.

It was a proximity I wouldn't have allowed before. And a reaction I couldn't have dreamed I'd have towards anyone.

"How did you know?" I breathed. "About the setting? Did you read my mind?"

His eyes widened with surprise before he laughed softly with a head shake. "No. I wouldn't even if I could. This is just the image I associate with this music. They played it in the palace when I stayed there, before…"

His hands left my waist and his shoulders slumped from beneath my hands, like a sudden weight had been dropped on them.

I didn't need to ask what thought weighed him down. It was a part of his life before his stepmother had banished him from his father's court.

"This is a piece from the first ballet I had a principal role in," I offered, hoping that changing the subject would break the moment. "Do you know its story?"

Mouth quirked in a half-hearted smile, Dietrich held his hand out to me. "Tell it to me?"

Setting one hand in his and the other on his shoulder, I leaned my weight on him. "What story do I get in exchange?"

"Nice try, Aventina. You first need to share memories of equal weight to the ones I did."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine, fine. You can have the story for free this time."

And I started recounting the plot of *The Music Box* as we softly swayed to the music.

Soon, the crescendo swelled, and snippets of the steps that always accompanied it played in my mind. My heart squeezed as the moment for the jeté—a flying leap I could never make again—came.

As if he'd read my mind, or just my expression, since I believed him when he said he didn't, he asked, "Have you attempted to dance as you had before?"

"Of course I have!" I cried, choked up. "I once tried to do a mere cabriole, where I jump and"—I tapped my fore and middle fingers together, miming the move I had attempted with my legs mid-air—"and nearly landed on my teeth."

My elbow stung with the memory of that awful landing; it had felt like a bolt of lightning had shot up my arm. I could have broken my elbow, too.

Dietrich hummed, looking lost in thought for a minute. "Is it because of the pain? If so, can't you take something to numb it and dance?"

"Yes and no." I paused to side-step the circle the others moved in. This was where the dancers enchanted their clothes into snowflakes surrounding the main characters, their energetic movements along with the intensity of the music signifying a snowstorm.

At his cocked eyebrow, I elaborated, "It's not the sort of pain you're used to withstanding for a task. That I can and have ignored." I raised my right leg to the side then carefully lowered it. "It's an injury. And if I ignore it to try dancing as I once did, I will only cause more permanent damage, and might not be able to walk at all. It doesn't help that this leg has gotten weaker and can't take my weight as well as it used to."

His eyes searched my face earnestly for a moment, then lowered to watch my feet as we moved. "So, if you were lighter, do you think you could still dance—maybe not as you did before, but in general?"

"It's possible, but I'm not risking my health to weigh as much as a child."

Chuckling, he shook his head. "That wasn't what I was suggesting."

"Then what?"

"I'll show you, if you show me your favorite part of this dance."

Weighing the risk versus the reward, I decided whatever aid he must have in mind could be worth the ache and embarrassment of fumbling a step.

To be on the safe side, I chose a move that required I lead with my left foot. It would be far from my best due to lack of practice and nerves, but I was determined to make it work.

Embarking into the center to have space for my steps, I waited for the music to shift to a lighter but faster tune that would give way to the repetitive movements of the piqué manège.

Pushing off my left foot, raising my right one up and inward, I twirled, repeating the same move three times carefully until I slipped back into my past fluidity of motion.

With each spin, I felt an odd shift in my body, like my arms had grown larger, their weight redistributed somehow, and each spin catching the air like a sail on a windy day. This strangely made me feel lighter, my right leg feeling far less strained and the constant tension I felt from its condition growing smaller.

It was when I spun faster than I ever had, pirouetting with my arms up, that I recognized what this odd sensation was. It had been there, on a smaller scale, the day I fled for home in the form of a swan.

Eyes wrenching open, I was greeted with enormous wings whipping about me as I turned, pearly-white and neatly arranged in meticulous layers from my shoulder blades to the tips of my fingers.

Heart stampeding, I landed in first position, moving my winged arms experimentally, in an arc, then in a soft, slow flutter. This wasn't like when I had been turned into a furious bird a fraction of my size and weight. This was a fascinating form, a fantastical merge that should be painted on the walls of temples and depicted in whimsical paintings hung in master bedrooms, meant to catch the early morning light and inspire wistful sighs.

Surrounding sounds of awe gave my thoughts a voice, and they only increased when I resumed my dance, testing the effect the wings had previously given me.

With each step, spin, and saunter, I felt so much lighter and far more graceful, as though a strong enough flap of my winged arms would make my feet leave the floor like they once had.

The memory of my flight from the castle lake returned in full force, but the anchor of fear and the urgency of escape had been cut loose. I now coasted along, the wind my speed drummed up rushing through my hair, skirt and feathers.

Too caught up in the wonder of my current form, I didn't notice Dietrich approaching until he asked, "Did that help?"

I spun, nearly slapping him with one wing.

He caught it gently, peeking at me through the longest feathers like they were window shutters, framing his eyes and brows in a dramatic way. "That was uncalled for."

Though he was clearly joking, the whirlpool of conflicting emotions swirling within me created an uneven response, not quite accusatory, not quite joking either. "I'd say you deserve a lot worse than a little smack."

When my wing lowered, he came closer, as he had when we'd danced along with the students, who were engrossed in their practice once more now that I'd stopped dancing. "What do I deserve, then?"

"To be pushed off a mountaintop," I said without hesitation, unable to hide my grin.

He chuckled in amusement. "You know I'd just sprout wings larger than yours and fly."

"About that." I moved my wings back and forth, still retaining the bending flexibility of my arms. It was like they were still my own limbs, but with a different arrangement of muscles and thinner bones, with the feathers layered over them accordingly. Like they were designed to fit me as a stage costume. "Why am I a fury? This is what furies look like, isn't it?"

He pouted his lips in consideration, causing my heart to blip. "Depends on the account or the artistic expression. They're either women with feathered arms, or a giant bird with a woman's head."

"So you've never seen one yourself?"

"I haven't had much chance to travel, not beyond the jobs I'm given."

He cast a look at the windows, still frosted with the wintery illusion that kept the fantasy in motion, but the implication was clear. The hidden space of these mountains was where he'd spent his most of his life, first as an apprentice, and now as guardian.

He looked back at me, gesturing towards my wings. "I thought this might help with your weight and balance, allow you more leeway with your leg."

"It does help, a lot!" I rose back on my toes to demonstrate, keeping the wing movement steady. I realized I was putting as much effort into them as I once did in my footwork, which was the reverse of how ballet worked. Arms could only be in certain positions or do so many moves; the rest depended on the legs and their strength. But now, with wings, it worked the other way around. But it *did* work. "It's not a cure, but it's…"

There was no mere word for what this was. The feeling was too complex, both physically and emotionally.

A part of me was alarmed by this shift in my body, which in any other context would be horrific and a reminder of how much power he had over me. But the other part was overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude, not to mention wonder, and a childish preoccupation with the wings themselves and how they flapped and fluttered.

Like a little girl in a new dress, I spun. Instead of watching layers of tulle whip around me, I felt the feathers fanning the air, lifting half of my weight up.

Could I possibly fly like this? Like the furies in the paintings?

When I paused to ask, my question was stalled by the look on his face.

He looked as overwhelmed by new, powerful feelings as I was. But why?

I danced closer, feeling lighter than I had ever been, barely touching the ground, like a diving bird skimming the water with its feet. Except my target wasn't to pluck a fish from the waves, but to capture his attention. Not that I needed to. All of it was transfixed on me.

Setting my hands back on his shoulders, my wings encasing our heads and blocking them from view, I asked, "What is it?"

His hands found my waist, a light touch that made my insides vibrate. "Nothing."

"It's definitely something."

He gave me a chiding look. "It won't make much sense beyond the parameters of my own head."

"Try me," I dared.

"It's just…" Dietrich let out a heavy breath, eyes downcast as if with shame. "Looking at you right now, and how you responded to transformations and illusions that I famously use for the benefit of the undeserving—it made me remember why I take such commissions to begin with."

"To keep the school running?"

"And to hopefully have enough sway one day to remind people that magic can be a source of awe and aid, not just terror and tragedy."

Warmth blossomed in my heart, opening all my restrained feelings towards him layer by layer, like rows of petals ready to catch the light.

"I think you'll find people are more keen to have magic in their lives than the fear-mongers would have you believe," I said, voice unsteady with emotion. "I know I am, now that I've seen a mere sample of the good it can do for others."

A low but intense glow lit his eyes, making breathing an afterthought. Never had I seen this spark in their clear depths before—not the usual flash of lightning, but a steady, blue fire of relief—and vulnerability?

"You have no idea how much your acceptance means to me," he whispered, a ragged edge to his deep voice.

My chest expanded with a tremulous inhalation to accommodate my growing heart. He pulled me closer and I folded my wings around him as we rotated through the whimsical tune and soft colors that enveloped us, like we were the centerpiece of a music box. Nothing beyond our cocoon existed.

When the outro played and the last notes of music and shuffles of movement faded, I rose back on my toes to whisper in his ear, "I'm ready to share my story."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After entertaining as many enthusiastic questions as I could from the students, giving out critiques and praise as well as promising to return for their next practice, Dietrich had us return to take supper in his private quarters.

Wings gone, food served, and overworked foot propped up on a cushion, I drifted in and out of a hazy state of mind. Like I was looking through those windows with frosted corners. An inverse vignette that blurred my focus instead of sharpening it.

Amidst the fog, nothing existed but my lingering awe of the winged and wintering enchantments in the practice room, and my feelings about the man who'd cast them.

Dietrich's voice, low, comforting, speaking in a thespian's arresting cadence as he sat beside me, hummed in my ears, further unclasping my connection to the present and sliding me into the scene of comfort he'd set.

Stubbornness and pride dictated I tie all my losses to his ankles and let him sink to the bottom of my despair. But I no longer felt like I was drowning in it.

In fact, this was the lightest I'd felt in years, like I was a few deep breaths away from floating on the breeze.

Sunset and the crackling fireplace cast a warmer tone and deeper shadows over the room. While it made the interior look different, Dietrich was the one I saw in yet another new light.

I didn't know how long I'd been staring when he faced me, the intensity of his eyes, unaffected by the lighting, eliminating the haze that lulled my focus.

"Does it still hurt?" he asked, tender with concern, hand hovering over my foot.

Oh. He'd assumed my distraction was because of a surge in pain. And I'd rather drink pond water than admit I had trailed off mid-conversation because I was trying to make sense of my feelings towards him.

"It always hurts, but in a manageable way," I admitted. "I'll be fine."

Maintaining eye contact, he rested his hand on my ankle. A soft, casual touch, like he himself hadn't noticed the gesture. "What do you usually do to alleviate it?"

My mouth was suddenly drier than the deserts of Cahraman, the rise in body temperature coming from the points where his palm touched my skin.

"Pain treatments, letting it rest, or massaging it," I rasped.

I'd barely said the last word when his hand tightened around my ankle, fingertips pressing into the dips around it, the soft pressure alleviating some of the dull ache. "Like this?"

"Yes," I breathed, pulse louder than the crackling of the fireplace.

At my breathless admission, he started massaging my ankle and a part of my calf as if he'd absorb the pain into himself.

My toes wiggled of their own accord, and so did my fingers, spasming from a surge of something I couldn't quite describe buzzing through my extremities.

Flustered like never before, I was relieved to have a ready distraction. I had put off my end of the bargain for too long.

Finishing my drink to wet my dry tongue and throat, I finally resumed telling him my story. "As I told you, two years ago, I was dancing the lead in the performance celebrating my father's twenty years on the throne."

He nodded without taking his eyes off his task. "Yes, playing Idonea in *The Golden Apple*."

A burst of pleasure spread through me, that he'd listened, and remembered.

I cleared my throat. "Yes, and in the segment where Prince Valdemar rescues her from the Fairy King, I—"

The last gulp came back up my throat, gurgling my words as my insides tied themselves in knots. Dietrich's hand tightened around my leg, grounding me back to the moment.

"Aventina?" he prompted, voice edged in concern.

I wiped away the tears that rose to my eyes on the back of my hand. "If I'm going to keep blubbering all over you, you must call me Ava."

The corner of his lips quirked in a half-hearted smile, weighed down with worry. "Ava, you can choose any other tale to tell if this one pains you."

I shook my head as I moved away before pushing myself up on my feet. A whispering corner of my mind lamented the loss of his hand on my leg. "No. I'm making it out to be far worse than it actually is."

He rose after me, spectacular eyebrows knotting. "I think I'll be the judge of that."

Sniffling once before composing myself, I headed to the carpet between the seating area and the fireplace, and let myself slip back into that dreaded memory.

Carefully reenacting the steps, pretending my partner was there for our pas de deux, I hummed the music—a hurried rush of strings, bows scraping out dark tones on a counter bass and harpsichord, the percussion banging thunderclaps on their largest drums, creating a heart-pumping urgency.

I was meant to be escaping with Prince Valdemar, while dancers playing demons and animated trees rushed at us, crowding us towards the props of the dark forest where we'd be parted. The Fairy King chased after me, and I did a series of spins and leaps to escape him, each jump in time with a shrill flute, signifying Idonea's screams.

"I'd done it countless times," I said, arms out, my steps taking me back to where he stood by the coffee table. "Speeding up to a sprint, then a spin and a leap—only to land wrong."

"Wrong how?"

"Somehow, I kicked up too high, practically flying, and instead of landing softly, leading with the front of my foot, I landed sideways on my ankle—" I banged my fist on the table, rattling its contents, a stuttering breath leaving me as the memory speared through me all over again. "I didn't hear the crack over the music, only felt it…

"Nevertheless, the show must go on." I stepped away from him, continuing the dance despite the pain, just as I had that night. "Though my ankle hurt so much, tears were ruining my makeup, I continued the routine." I slowly went through the moves, a controlled display like the ones used to meticulously teach us the mechanics. "The dance got more intense. Confrontational, miming a fight,

where I kept kicking up in spins even through the pain. I don't know if it was the numbness that was creeping in, but the floor felt too smooth, almost wet, like it had been oiled—and I slipped. In my effort to stop…" I turned, kicking my left foot around, then leaned back and bent my knee. "…I twisted in a terrible angle—and pitched myself into the orchestra."

Normally, this was the point in the account where someone stifled a laugh. Or in my sister's case, laughed herself into a snorting fit, telling me that I should have seen myself sprawled in the pit, that I should have quit dancing when she had.

But Dietrich found no humor in my comically stupid accident. "You broke your ankle?"

"And hurt my knee, if to a lesser degree, probably because my balance was already thrown," I said bitterly. "Amazing how delicate I turned out to be after years of training."

I lowered back into first position, stretched out my right leg to roll my ankle, then bent and straightened my knee. "It took ages to heal, but no amount of bedrest would have returned me to my original condition."

"You should have been rehabilitated!" He advanced on me, eyes brimming with furious disbelief. "How did your palace medical staff not do that for you? This could have been avoided!"

It was a question that had plagued me the first year post-accident. There were stories of ballerinas returning to the stage after injuries, somehow training back to dancing condition throughout their recovery. But I'd realized, when it had already been too late, that I hadn't been afforded the same resources or concern.

"They didn't tell me that," I said, throat tightening as if around ground glass. "Just that my injury had been severe. That it was a long time coming, because I had 'accumulated stress fractures' and that night was the last straw for my leg. That I'd never dance again."

The way I'd lost my grip when the doctor had said that had been embarrassing to witness, but agonizing to experience. I had immediately burst into tears, only to be cuddled like a silly child lamenting the loss of a favorite toy by my aunt Lizaveta.

My father, while sympathetic, had clumsily comforted me by saying I could now focus on my duties.

That had just made me cry harder.

Dancing had been my only connection to my departed mother and her mother before her. The only activity detached from my existence as heir, the one thing I did for myself, not for my future as Mother of the Realm—and it had been ripped from me in an instant.

My vision swam with hot tears, the waterfall of longing and despair pooling in my mouth, like I was struggling to keep my head above the waves of a stormy sea.

A light touch to my chin calmed the waters, and I let my face be tipped up to meet Dietrich's searching gaze. His thumb brushed over my lower lip, and I let out a shuddering breath, giving in shamelessly to his solicitous touch.

"Between you and me, I think they were relieved I was 'grounded.' That meant there was no risk of me shirking my duties onto Lina so I could be the nation's prima donna for a handful of years. I saved them any possible headaches, and humbled myself while I was at it." I laughed in between sobs, bordering on hysterical. "Some days, I like to entertain the idea that it was a set-up, just so I can stop blaming myself."

"It could have very well been," he said somberly, eyes brightening with a forbidding glow. "It isn't far-fetched to think they'd sabotage you to break your spirit, make you more malleable. As a princess with no other option, you'd be less trouble for your advisors and more reliant on them. It would also secure you for the role, since they couldn't abide the alternative with your sister such a

menace."

"How often do such things happen?" I whispered, head whirling with all the terrible possibilities I never let myself dwell on.

"More often than you'd think. It seems there's nothing kingdoms wouldn't stoop to, to check unruly heirs—like Siegfried."

I blinked through my tears, my spiral through remembered misery and bitterness cut off by surprise. "You know what got him passed over for Alberich, don't you?"

He gave a humorless laugh. "Of course I do. I was the one called in to clean up his messes by King Ludwig's right-hand."

"What did he do?"

"Plenty. He seemed to have a bi-weekly disaster, and they paid me very well to make them disappear. But though I did—uh, resolve his latest one, it was the last straw for the old man." He seemed reluctant to go on, and I made an exasperated hurrying gesture. He exhaled. "He was protesting the engagement the king brokered for him, to Princess Isaure of Armorica. Siegfried called her 'unsightly,' when she is accomplished and beloved by her people, and way out of his league. It was very fortunate for her when he succeeded in forcing our father to break it off."

Noting how he'd absently said "our father," I pressed, "How did he do that?"

His lips twisted in distaste. "He had an affair with an engaged noblewoman and got her pregnant."

Shock punched my chest, my gasp coming out a wheeze. "No. Siggy wouldn't!"

His face darkened but he only shrugged. "You're free not to believe me."

But I did. Even as a child, Siegfried had famously been one to eschew rules and respectability, to cause enough problems to be sent away to a boarding school and kept away from international events.

Then he was stripped of his title as heir. Something that only happened in extreme cases. He had to have done something unforgivable. Like what Dietrich had just related.

Swallowing my disbelief, I urged him to continue. "Tell me the rest."

Dietrich shook his head, as if acknowledging the futility of holding back now. "I was contracted by Lyonesse's court and his paramour's father, to *convince* her own betrothed that the child was his, urging them to elope." Dietrich tilted his head, as if pausing to remember something. "That was after said betrothed challenged Siegfried to a duel for using his future wife to play out his royal tantrum, and disgracing him publicly."

"That's…Oh, that's just…" My head swam. filling with the dim vision of Siegfried as my fated consort, who'd reunited with me just when I'd needed him. That he'd been there to sweep me off my ruined feet after he'd become free of his birthright. Free to be with me.

How stupid I'd been. Desperate for something to pin my carefree childhood memories on after my ability to dance had been torn away.

Dietrich's fingers coaxed my chin up, and I choked, "Why did he come to me then?"

His hand released my chin, tenderly sliding back to cup my jaw, as if bolstering me for his reply, apologizing for the pain it would inflict. "After being cast out by our father, he made the rounds on available heiresses among the nobility. When none wanted anything to do with a demoted prince, he sought out older women, both widowed and married, to finance his life of excess. Then he heard of your confirmation as crown princess of Opona and rushed to try his luck with you. You were his best possible option."

"Because if he could not be crown prince again, becoming a prince consort was the next best thing," I summed up dully. "That's why he didn't notice any difference between me and Lina. He doesn't care about me, or about who funds his lifestyle."

He waved dismissively. “If you ask me, they deserve each other.”

True as that was, it didn’t cheer me up.

Bogged down by the revelation that the childhood crush I had struggled to return to, who I’d believed to be a victim of Lina’s scheme, had been just as self-serving as her, I let go of my form.

Good posture gave way to a dejected slouch, and I let my head drop into his hand, face in his palm. “You’d think I’d be a better judge of character, considering the job I was born and bred for.”

His raised his other hand, thumb caressing my overheated cheek, a thread of merriment lacing through his hypnotic voice. “Yes, wanting to see the best in people can be a hindrance. But with enough time and treatment, I’m sure we can crush the last shred of naivety within you.”

I laughed, puffs of a scratchy noise bubbling against his large, warm palm. “I think I’m starting to understand how you can be the way you are. How you can turn off that sympathetic and moral side to do what needs to be done.”

“Do you?”

At the skepticism in his tone, I sniffled loudly as I raised my head, wiping at my lashes. His hand followed me up, brushing away moisture from my trembling cheek.

Struggling not to nuzzle his hand, I hiccuped. “Had I known what Siegfried and Lina held in their hearts towards me, I would have punished them. My feelings towards them as my childhood friend and twin sister would have had no bearing on their sentences.” I paused as his gaze and touch gentled even more, then exhaled heavily. “At least, I hope I would have been able to harden my heart to that extent. Not get my feelings in the way of what needed to be done.”

“And what would you have done?”

“The punishment for subterfuge or treason ranges from imprisonment to execution. Depending on the extent of the crime, that is.”

“And what would you do if you had the option of magic?”

“I don’t know.” My gaze clung to his for a long moment before I whispered, “What would you do?”

He smirked, his eyes and face lighting up with a righteous yet mischievous fire. “Turn them into ducks or toads to keep in your palace lake. Close enough to everything they coveted and betrayed you for, but void of any privileges or the ability regain them.”

I grinned tremulously up into his wicked eyes. “Torturous. I like it.”

Dietrich smiled down at me, thumb stroking my cheekbone, before his eyes grew serious, solemn even. “Had I been there that night you were injured, I’d have used every ounce of magic within me to heal you before the damage could take hold.”

I shuddered as I closed my eyes on a new rush of burning tears before I opened them, and stared my gratitude into his stunning eyes. “It means a lot”—too much—“for you to say that. But you would have had no reason to do so then. Or would you have asked for payment?”

I might have imagined the wince before he released my face, stepping back towards the balcony, opening the doors with a flick of his wrist. “I wouldn’t have turned it down if offered. But I wouldn’t have done it for that reason.”

I followed, watching him become bathed in the afternoon glow. It suffused him in warm colors that harkened his form as that majestic horned owl.

I came to a stop behind him, fighting the need to lean on him as I said breathlessly, “Then why would you have done it?”

Without turning to me, he said, “Because it would have been a great injustice to witness you dancing as I have today, see how passionate you are, and not do what I could to preserve that

perfection. It would take a much harder man to see how you glow with your love for dance, and not love you for it."

My heart fluttered as the emotions he inspired resurged, a mass of butterflies trying to fly out through the gaps between my ribs and form the words I couldn't find.

Before I could express how he made me feel, even to myself, he suddenly levitated onto the balustrade, breeze billowing his loose clothes and blowing through the glossy waves of his hair.

As every nerve in my body quivered at his awe-striking form towering above me, Dietrich held his hand down to me, earnest and determined as he pledged, "You may not dance again, but you will fly."

Breathless with wonder and hope, I gave him my hand. And with it, I threw all caution to the wind that blew through my hair once he tugged me over the edge, and into a free fall.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In a mere moment, my arms had become wings once again.

There was no room for panic when the thrill of doing something so unthinkable as allowing myself to be pulled off a balcony was so strong.

Gravity tugged at me, and I felt my insides fly back against my spine as the wind blew up through cloth, hair, and feathers like an inverse waterfall.

Beside me, Dietrich fully spread his majestic wings, the woodsy shades of his feathers gleaming along with his hair. His eyes were closed, face in a peaceful profile, as if leaping off a ledge was like sinking in a warm bath.

This must have been what I looked like when I danced, finding peace in an act many found impossible.

In this instance, I understood what he'd meant. I felt his words echo deep within me as the ground approached. *It would take a much harder man to see how you glow with your love for dance and not love you for it.*

I could substitute woman for man, and flight for dance, and I would mean every word— about him.

Dietrich arced his body, wings back. "We're going to fly up in three, two—"

Pure instinct overtook any other sensation. Like I was taking a stance before springing into motion, I kicked into form, legs together, chest out and arms back.

Then, with a mere bend of my spine and sweep of my wings, I flew up.

It wasn't like last time, when I was a swan desperately trying to travel to another land. With a much larger, stronger wingspan and the familiarity of my human body, I had more control, blending the experiences of my prior flight and my dance to find their median point.

With the wings of a giant owl and swan, Dietrich and I soared up along the tower we'd leaped from. Engrossed in the experience with my every breath and heartbeat, I saw the castle grounds shrink and where its lake began and ended.

As the momentum of soaring slowed, I had to begin flapping. It took a few stumbling moves, but I instinctively understood what I needed to do to maintain my flight.

The precision in my movements, the importance of form, and the strength needed to keep that balance had me feeling like I was dancing horizontally, except the brunt of the effort was on my arms instead of my legs.

High above the grounds of Castle Mondsee, I saw its layout become less detailed, like the view

from a map. But cartographers and painters alike had never had this view. Only a few people had had the privilege of seeing what their world looked like from such a vantage point.

And thanks to Dietrich, I was now one of them.

I was enraptured by the delight of flight, of pain-free movement—the freedoms he'd created for me.

It would have been painfully ironic a few days ago, to attribute a freedom of any sort to my captor.

But I couldn't call him that anymore. Instead of me being a hostage, Dietrich was now my host. No, more. My liberator.

Seeking him out, I found him showing off his experience, doing loops and spinning through the air. The embodiment of unrestrained joy, too high to be held down by the weight of the world below, he laughed and whooped.

If the flutter in my chest had been butterflies, they were now songbirds. Triple the wingspan and ten times the strength, intensifying the sensation.

"You're a natural!" he called over to me. "I'd be envious if I wasn't relieved."

I flew closer to him with an upward surge, gasping at the shift in temperature as a sudden chill nipped at my skin. "What is there to envy?"

"It took ages for me to learn the mechanics of flight. I fell and crashed into trees, buildings and mountains until I mastered this form. Yet here you are, like you've done it your whole life."

"I have, in a sense. The basics of it are just like what I did on stage."

"Are they?"

Taking a risk, I pirouetted sideways, wings in as I spun. Spreading them back out before my level could dip, I let out the breath I was holding.

This should have been a daunting task, and the view beneath me ought to have been nauseating, but I felt nothing but elation.

Delirium climbed, my ribcage its step-ladder, and burst out of me in a cackle.

I launched into a few more attempts, transferring those ingrained routines onto my new platform, movements just as fluid and body as controlled as they would have been were I upright.

At that thought, I became vertical.

"Careful!" Dietrich shouted, flying backwards so he could face me.

Keeping my wings in a continuous motion, I hovered for an instant before I swallowed my fear and did what I'd been longing to do ever since that fateful night.

I led with my right foot, twirling then kicking up with a whoop, tossing myself up higher, before dropping with my arms up. Instead of landing on my foot, I just continued my midair kicks and leaps, exhilaration buzzing through my blood. I felt like I was running water, coursing through a fresh trench, carving unimagined paths through an uncharted space.

The strange part was that *it worked*. Like playing a piece made for the piano on a harpsichord. It was different, but it worked just as well.

No, better than ever before. This was the most amazing dance I'd ever performed.

Dietrich flew in circles around me, observing me, a hunting move done by his fellow birds of prey. But there was nothing to fear from his focused gaze. There was only my own wonder reflected in them.

Righting myself, I flew towards him and he caught me. We spun down a few leagues before parting to resume our pace.

"Did you see?" I asked excitedly.

“More like I witnessed.” He nodded, voice ragged. “Never did I think to associate dancing and flying, but I don’t have your insight into this field. Let alone your expertise and agility.”

My heartbeat thrummed with delight. “My instructor always said to move as light as the birds flew, that the dancer’s domain was air. Being earthbound then, that was metaphorical, save for the brief moments I emulated flight, but now….now…” I trailed off, at a loss for words.

“Now you can soar, literally,” he finished for me.

“Exactly!”

We hovered there for what felt like an eternity, the only sounds from the beating of our wings and the wind they drummed up. The rays that peeked through the overhead clouds caressed his face lovingly, bringing out all the shades in his rioting hair.

In this moment, I couldn’t remember how I had ever despised him.

The enchantment only deepened when he spoke. “Think this is enough for today, or can you keep going?”

Shaking off my daze, I nodded, eager for more. “What do you have in mind?”

“A lap around the grounds. That’s how long it usually takes before I’m ravenously hungry.”

As he shot away, I followed him at my own breezy pace, shouting, “And what are we going to remedy that hunger with?”

“First one to complete the lap chooses what’s for dinner.”

I spluttered my dismay. “That’s not fair! You’re going to win based on wingspan and stamina alone.”

Flashing me a mischievous grin, he shot upwards before diving. “Never said I was fair. I am merely an opportunist.”

Flapping as hard as I could to reach my peak, I used the momentum of falling to drop alongside him towards the starting point of our race.

“And what opportunity are you aiming for tonight? A rodent of some sort?” I yelled over the noises of our flight. “In that case, you can eat on your own.”

“Was that an owl joke?” His guffaw was half-drowned out by the air that shrieked by. “What would your swan sensibilities suggest instead? A serving of grass and beetles?”

“Those might be a delicacy somewhere! Can’t say the same for rats.”

“Oh, I’m sure we can find a compromise that would suit your royal palate as well my bloodthirst.”

Spluttering with laughter, I strained to overtake him, trying not to move my legs as the urge to kick through the air like I was swimming was too great. “Do sorcerers drink blood now?”

He gave me a bedeviling glance over his shoulder as I caught up with him. “Only that of hapless maidens lost in the woods. Now the babies, those we eat whole.”

“Pity you can’t feed on the unsavory people among us.”

Dietrich tutted, gliding past me with effortless ease. “Wouldn’t you enjoy your beverages more if they weren’t as bitter as poison, like our siblings are?”

Still riding the rush of his wonder at my dancing flight, I wanted to nudge him for more. Not to lift my sunken spirits, but to get a better grasp on his feelings towards me.

To see if the flames of my feelings had been kindled in his heart as they had in mine.

“If Lina is bitter, does that make me sweet?” I asked, openly fishing.

“Absolutely not.”

Disappointment was a gulp down the wrong pipe. “Rude!”

I kicked his left leg, making us spin in mid-air once more, putting me in the lead.

He chuckled as he overtook me again. “Oh, don’t be that way. You don’t want to be sweet, certainly not all the time.”

“And why not? Likability is an important trait to have as someone people will defer to.”

He scrunched his face as if at an unpleasant taste. “One can quickly tire of sweetness. It must be taken in small doses or else it becomes sickening and loses its value as a treat. It needs a salty, sour or even bitter foundation to balance it, to not spoil its effect.”

“Is this your way of saying you can’t have good days if you don’t have any bad ones?”

“In a sense. Those who never experience suffering are blind to beauty.”

“Bittersweet is not something I hoped to embody.”

“But that is what most lives are, in some form or another.”

Was that what my life was to be, bitter from loss of ballet and betrayal, but sweetened by magic—and the one who wielded it?

Clearing my throat from the surge of longing that clogged it, I aimed for a lighthearted quip. “All this talk of taste. Are you getting hungry already?”

He quirked a teasing eyebrow. “Hoping that slows me down?”

I stuck my tongue out before using him as a launchpad, kicking him down and propelling myself forward. “Merely being an opportunist.”

“Ah, I see the only thing I’ll be eating is my words.”

And we both burst out laughing and shrieking as we embarked on more of a chase than a race around the borders of Castle Mondsee.

The giddiness gave me a courage only the strongest vodka back home could, urging me to try almost every move that struck me in the air.

At one point, as if we’d agreed, we gave up our competition. Reaching an altitude that wasn’t so high up as to become lightheaded, and not low enough to risk scraping the mountain peaks, we soared alongside one another.

I didn’t know how long we glided before our perfect bliss was shattered by an earth-shaking boom.

Trajectory stuttering with shock, I focused more on maintaining my flight than checking for the source of the noise.

It boomed again, this time much closer.

Could it be thunder? But the clouds were too light for…

Another rib-rattling boom burst too close to me, spreading a sharp rise in temperature, forcing a scream out of me and my frantic gaze down.

I saw the hurtling ball of blistering red light too late to avoid it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

By sheer luck, the missile only grazed me instead of hitting me head-on.

The charge still scorched my clothes and punched overwhelming nausea from my clenching gut up to my sealing-with-terror throat.

Seeking out Dietrich, I could barely shriek what was going on before he swooped in, kicking me out of the way of another attack.

The red light hit him full in his side, and my heart dropped along with him.

There was no space in my skull for worrying about the red hexes, or the feasibility of going after him.

Angling myself, I sailed down headfirst into a swan dive.

Attacks exploded around us, flashing blinding red light and burning through the air, but I didn't care. I got close enough to Dietrich's plummeting figure, hair and feathers flying up, and wrapped my legs around his middle.

Knees hooking under his arms, I flapped my wings harder than ever before, slowing our descent as I looked around in a panic, for the source of the hexes and a place to land.

Heart beating faster than my wings, his weight was too great for me to stay afloat for too long. Sweat had already drenched my scalp and back with the effort, and my muscles started trembling out of control.

"Dietrich!" I gasped, squeezing my legs tighter around him, hoping the pressure would rouse him. If only I had clawed feet, I would have had a better grip on him. "Dietrich, wake up!"

He had to wake up! This wasn't Siegfried with a bow. This was magic powerful enough to hurt him.

This was another sorcerer.

The strain on my wings had become too great. They weren't like my legs had been, powerful with practice. The burn of overexertion flowed through my upper body like lava pouring down the sides of its volcano.

Any longer and we'd both drop to our deaths.

Another red blast brushed by us, and the jarring force and heat were too much for me. My momentum stuttered and he slipped from my grasp.

My scream filled the valley, its shrillness echoing to encompass my terror.

Suddenly, his body stiffened and straightened, and the last burning breath that left my parched mouth was one of shearing relief.

Awake and afloat, Dietrich shot back up. “Are you all right?”

“Me? What about you? You got hit with a…with a…”

He cast his head around, eyes searching. “A collapsing hex. A brutal spell used on battlefields.”

“Who around here would do such a thing to us?”

The answer came in another burst of sound, and a cannonball of eye-watering red light surged overhead.

Face twisted with fury, Dietrich shot towards the source of the magic. “There’s our answer.”

Without a thought, I followed, and the closer we got to a nearby mountain plateau, the clearer it became.

As I thought, a sorcerer in billowing maroon robes stood with glowing hands raised, his curly brown hair blowing back from the force of his magic.

Once close enough to discern his features, I judged him to be in his late-twenties, around Dietrich’s age, with large pale eyes, thin lips and an enormous forehead that was scrunched up with the confusion that held off his attacks. He must have expected us to flee in the other direction.

“Anyone you know?” I yelled.

Dietrich startled, throwing me an infuriated look over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” he yelled back at me. “Go back to the tower! Wait until I deal with him.”

“And leave you alone? He’s already nearly killed you once! He’ll try it again!”

Our debate didn’t matter, as the sorcerer had vanished in a swirling column of russet smoke.

“Now what?”

Before he could answer, Dietrich’s eyes widened at something in the distance behind me.

I swirled around to find the sorcerer had reappeared on a lower level of the mountain. Closer to the castle.

“Who is he?”

Dietrich flew in his direction. “Gunther Gottschalk. He was expelled from Mondsee for testing dangerous spells on his roommates. He’s earned a reputation as a sorcerer without standards.”

I followed, even more discomfited by that response. “And by that you mean…?”

“He does what I refuse to do, for a fraction of the price.”

“Is he here to challenge you for clients or something? Taking out the competition?”

“He’s prideful enough to do so.”

As if in response, Gottschalk flung another fireball our way. But with a sweep of his gargantuan wings, Dietrich conjured up enough wind to turn it to smoke.

“Ava, I’ll only say this once more: *Go back to the tower*.” Dietrich took off in his direction, legs transforming into the taloned feet of a vulture. “This is between me and my rival.”

I didn’t want to leave him, but I barely had enough strength left in me to make the flight back to the castle. And someone needed to warn the staff, and make sure the children remained indoors.

Mid-flight, Dietrich’s transformation took hold, morphing him into an enormous and frightful merge between man and bird of prey.

The sight reminded me of how powerful he truly was, how such power would have proven catastrophic in a less scrupulous sorcerer’s hands.

Swallowing the painful urge to remain with him come what may, I forced myself to fly away, praying he wouldn’t let his “standards” stand in the way of defending himself against his rogue rival.

Sounds of struggle erupted behind me, but the farther I flew, the quieter it became. That only ratcheted my dread for Dietrich.

Then an enraged shriek filled the air, and I couldn’t control myself. I had to check up on him.

The jarring vulture-like form of Dietrich flew in grand circles around the area I'd just left, searching for Gottschalk, who must have pulled another disappearing act.

The distraction was all it took to disrupt my escape.

Searing heat hit my left wing and a wave of numbness overtook me, filling my skin with a million scalding pins and needles that arrested my every nerve.

Horror drenched me like tar, weighing me down until no amount of determination could make me beat my wings.

Like a duck struck by a hunter's arrow, I fell.

But even in my heart-uprooting terror, I realized. This wasn't the same hex Dietrich had taken for me. Gottschalk must be out of those. It was why I remained conscious, I screamed—and I finally understood.

Gottschalk wasn't after Dietrich.

He was after me.

The realization sank through me like a stone in a pond, slowing time around me, my plummet accompanied by the wind screeching in my ears and the violent flutter of my feathers.

The distorted moment shattered at the sight of the monstrous avian form of Dietrich hurtling towards me, talons outstretched.

Despite being in a more frightening form than when he'd chased me home, I felt nothing but desperation for him to reach me, to catch me.

I now trusted him completely, with my very life.

His gigantic clawed feet had barely closed around my middle when a blinding yellow ray hit his wing, setting its feathers aflame.

Panic blared through my skull, loud enough to rival his deafening roar. No amount of flapping would render the fire to smoke. It only encouraged it to grow across his back.

There was nothing I could do but watch his beautiful wings burning in horror as Dietrich dodged another hit from our attacker and, even burning alive, somehow pushed himself to fly us back towards the castle.

But once above the lake, Dietrich suddenly let me slip through his grip.

Just as the world whirled around me, I realized he had only dropped me because the fire had transferred to my wing. I tumbled down through the air, too disoriented to even think of righting myself. I hit the water with a crash, feeling it as a solid surface on impact then sinking hard and fast.

Numb with pain, I felt my feet touch the pebbled bottom. Pushing myself to the surface of the murky water took most of the strength I had left. Head still spinning, panic tightening my muscles nearly to the point of snapping, I searched around frantically for Dietrich.

The other sorcerer landed before me, turning the water to ice to steady himself above me.

Hands crackling with fire, he leered down at me. "Princess Avelina sends her love."

That was all it took to reinvigorate me. With an enraged screech, I threw my weight onto the miniature glacier, unbalancing him into the water and pouncing on him, my right knee driving into his chest, my left into his neck.

Bubbles burst up from his submerged mouth as he tried to push me off. But he was quickly running out of air, and no amount of power could negate the need to breathe!

My wings shifted back into arms as I dragged him down deeper. At the bottom, I picked the largest rock I could grab. Just as we broke the surface again, I raised it, ready to smash it down on his nose.

"Leave him to me!"

My head snapped up to find Dietrich had turned into a much larger, more grotesque hybrid. Even his voice had turned into an eerie, terrifying rumble. And when he landed on the beach I felt the earth quake, causing violent ripples in the lake.

The shift between forms had traded his charred wing for a larger model, a different structure. Gone were all traces of the owl, a predator with the admirable beauty of a cat or a wolf, and here was the horrifying form of a vulture from darkest myth.

My distraction gave Gottschalk the chance to throw me off him and splash up to the beach, gasping brutally for air.

The sorcerer fell to his knees, hands raised defensively at Dietrich as he whined breathlessly, "Oh, come on, Dirk. All that power and you waste it here, on those brats, and on her?"

"It is no business of yours how I use my magic."

"It is when it's getting in the way of the biggest deal I've ever closed!"

Dietrich hovered over him, swallowing us both in his shadow. "How did you know where she was?"

"Her sister said that she was with you. She contracted me to track you down and to off her."

"Did you tell her where we are?" Dietrich's rumble became even more frightening. "Did you tell her about Mondsee?"

Seemingly oblivious to Dietrich's rising fury, Gottschalk swept his drenched hair back from his forehead. "Yeah, I told her we were old schoolmates, and that you had to be here, since you'd never leave this place."

Dietrich let out a furious roar that hurt my ears and made my teeth gnash together. "You selfish wretch! You exposed this location to someone who would do us all harm!"

"What are you talking about?" Gottschalk exclaimed.

"Avelina is marrying Queen Corisande's son! Remember, the woman who had magic outlawed again, and wants to hunt us all to extinction?"

Gottschalk waved him away. "Being hunted is your fault, and that of our dear departed *pompous* mentors. They pay *me*. And you, for that matter. These kids in there would make fortunes, would have royalty and nobility eating out of their hands if you trained them right."

"I'm not training my students to walk in my miserable footsteps. I won't let them become mercenaries for these avaricious miscreants, too!"

Gottschalk shrugged. "Your, and their loss, then."

Dietrich's rumble vibrated in my bones as he bore down on the sorcerer. "They could now lay siege to this place, attack us with superior numbers until we exhaust our wards and spells, then burn it down with the children inside, wiping out the next generation of sorcerers!"

Gottschalk finally had enough sense to look worried. "Hey, that wasn't my intention."

"You know why we hide, what mortal danger exposure poses."

"You're making too much of it, Dirk."

"Too much? You just destroyed everything I worked for, what other sorcerers for generations had worked for. A safe haven for our kind!"

"I just wanted to get my money, get out, and buy my own castle. And I didn't tell her where this place is, so relax…" Gottschalk paused, as if an idea had struck him. Then schooling his features, he clambered to his feet, a smarmy smile creeping on his lips. "You know what? Let's split the reward. You get her out of your hair and you get paid a huge sum. The princess might even throw in a title or some land, maybe a reversal of the anti-magic laws for services rendered once she's Corisande's daughter-in-law. A win all around. What do you say?"

That was when I felt all could be lost. Dietrich would need to be on good terms with Lina, who was marrying his half-brother and would not only be queen of Opona, but the daughter-in-law of a royal fanatic and his enemy. He could also keep the academy and all its occupants safe and be paid enough to take care of them. He might even procure protection for all his kind.

I wasn't worth resisting such an offer.

"You don't even have to do anything since you're so against killing," Gottschalk laughed, emboldened by Dietrich's silence, approaching me. "You just sit back and let me do the honors."

"No, you won't," Dietrich hissed, making every nerve in my body vibrate. "You won't do anything ever again."

Before the frown could form on the sorcerer's face, Dietrich shot up off the ground and caught him in his talons.

"What are you doing?" Gottschalk screamed as Dietrich lifted him up and away.

"Giving you what befits one who betrays his own."

Gottschalk seemed to blast Dietrich with a dozen hexes at once, only for them to bounce off him, now he was ready for them.

Then just as Gottschalk's frantically kicking legs cleared the tower spire, Dietrich released him.

I covered my eyes before I could see him hit the ground.

The sound of crushing bones jolted a visceral reaction through me, scattering what remained of my composure as the stress of this entire situation reached its peak.

Stomach acid scalded the tender flesh of my throat as it came shooting from my mouth.

Dietrich landed near me as I retched on the water's edge, rapidly returning to human form as he fell to his knees beside me, holding his hands out urgently. "Are you all right? Is anything broken?"

Shaking my head, I continued to cough as I let myself be pulled up and into his arms. With no worries to spare, I sank into him, heaving and shaking.

"It's over," Dietrich said softly, stroking my wet hair. "He can't hurt you or anyone else here again."

I pulled my face away from his shoulder to look over it. Gunther Gottschalk lay still on the pebble beach, his limbs at unnatural angles, like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

No part of me cared to know if he was alive or not. He had attempted to kill me and almost killed Dietrich. And it wasn't true he couldn't hurt anyone here again. He already had. He'd destroyed this haven's purpose and put everyone in it in mortal danger.

"I had to do it, Ava," Dietrich said against my hair, voice ragged and distraught. "When I realized he only told Avelina of this place's presence, but not its location, I realized what I told him about the peril he'd placed Mondsee in only gave him an invaluable weapon he hadn't thought of before. I know him too well, and I practically saw him getting the idea of making an even bigger fortune by selling our exact location to the highest bidder—if I let him walk out of here alive. And I…"

He shook his head against mine and shuddered.

"You had to do it," I finished for him. He shuddered again, and I found the strength to wrap my limp arms around his shaking body, and hold him tighter than I ever held anyone.

He'd made sure everyone under his care, starting by me, remained safe. He'd saved me, and everyone else, yet again.

But at what price to himself?

Before I could draw back to look at him, tell him again he did the right thing, Dietrich moved first.

He carried me out of the water before carefully setting me on my feet, barely looking at me. "Can you walk? If you can, please get back to the castle, and stay there. I need to gather some guards and

members of the faculty to scout the area and extend our wards, just in case your sister sent another mercenary trailing Gottschalk."

That was something I hadn't considered. I boggled—not just at the convoluted extent my sister's hatred of me had reached, but at what Dietrich had sacrificed for me.

And I could only rasp, "Why?"

Dietrich searched my face, confused. "Why? Haven't you had your fill of danger for one day?"

"No, I mean, why didn't you take his offer? That could have put you back in Lina's good graces. She would have owed you massive favors once Ludwig becomes her father-in-law. You could have been made rich beyond measure, or even legitimized."

A cold hand cupped my face as his eyes gentled. "None of those things are worth your life. Not even if I were the type to accept such deals."

I pressed my hand over his, practically nuzzling his palm. "How can you be so sure?"

Letting out a shuddering breath, he pressed in, closing the gap between us.

The press of his lips against mine, the soft prickling of his beard on my skin, and the tender hand on my face snuffed out all sense and senses beyond him. All I felt was him, all I knew and all I wanted to know was him.

Then he was pulling away, and the only spell he'd performed without magic broke too soon.

Before I could pull him back to me, he stepped back, determination sharpening his features and gaze.

"The deal is off," he said with finality. "I'm taking you home."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Caught in a blurry haze, I barely remembered anything between yesterday and this morning.

Nurse Imelda had kept me company ever since Dietrich and a handful of teachers had gone to scout for threats. The search for further enemies had turned up empty, but Gottschalk's attack still had people on edge.

At least, that's what I could glean from her rambling. Focus was hard to achieve when I had yet to compartmentalize everything that had happened from the night of my confirmation until now.

I had yet to speak to Dietrich. The problem was, I didn't know where to begin when I saw him again.

When Imelda's break ended, we parted at the end of the hallway and I headed for the headmaster's quarters to await his return.

It took all I had to not peek outside the window, at where Gottschalk had lain. I'd almost given in to the urge when Dietrich entered the room.

Eager, I leaped up, earning a disapproving pop from my right knee.

Coming to stand before me, the distance between us measured by the box he held, he looked exhausted, cheeks sunken in, eyelids swollen, his hair a mess like he'd been running his fingers through it for hours.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, quiet, uneasy.

"I should be asking you that."

"I didn't have yet another attempt on my life orchestrated by my own twin."

I shrugged my shoulders, seeking out his eyes. "I didn't have to rid the world of someone—someone like myself—without being given the chance to think it over."

The corners of his mouth twitched, in what felt like an attempt not to grimace. "I know you don't have a high opinion of my efforts, but Gottschalk was among the last people I'd feel kinship for. He was a ruthless narcissist who actually sold his own mother's fate for profit. He would have done the same to all of us."

"Still, he was one of your kind. While I'm just another human."

He shook his head adamantly. "People like him are a worse detriment to my kind than Corisande and her ilk are. And you're not just another anything. I would choose you over any fellow sorcerer, over any sum of money, over any favors from my father."

I felt my chest filling with the flutter of a hundred butterfly wings again, but this time they were sharp, shredding. "What could I ever give you that's worth more than all that?"

He didn't answer at once, just stared at me for an endless, breathless, heart-stopping moment, his eyes a raging lightning storm of emotions.

When he finally spoke, his voice was subdued, unsteady. "Just being you." He paused again, as if struggling with himself, before he added in a ragged rush, "Those few days in your company were something I didn't know I needed, something I never dreamed I would experience. And now I am at risk of keeping you here forever, not for your own good but my own."

Eyes burning with tears, I still insisted on keeping them open, just to be certain that I wasn't dreaming. I reached for him, shakily tucking his disheveled hair behind his ear. "What nefarious purpose would you keep me for this time?"

"My own happiness," he said, his voice dipping into a rasp. "But I can't have that at the expense of your misery. This is why I must send you home."

I choked, at a loss for what to say.

How could I tell him that the prospect of finally returning home filled me with such hesitation? Such—aversion? When I couldn't understand it myself?

All I had wanted at first was to get away from here. Now all I could think about was how I hadn't had enough time in this place. Time to witness more magic, to get to know the staff, to help the enthusiastic students with their performances, to experience a flight that wasn't fraught with danger.

But most importantly, I wanted to spend more time with the one who'd sparked fire under my skin and in my heart. To be soothed by the tender tone of his voice, to be buoyed by his understanding and appreciation. And to be bewitched, not by the magic sparking between his fingers, but by the autumn sky he held in his eyes and the blinding beauty of his kindred soul.

When I found my voice, it came out as a croak. "So, you meant it. About letting me go."

Dietrich pressed the box into my hands stiffly. "These are the clothes and accessories you wore the night I took you, mended and cleaned."

"You want me to reappear the same as I did the night I disappeared?" I attempted to tease, needing to alleviate the unbearable somberness of these moments. "Can't be bothered to lend or spell me some clothes?"

"It is more for the dramatic flair of your return." His lips twisted in distaste. "And to see the look on Avelina's face."

I smothered a snort, before I sobered. "You sure you're not taking me back because I proved to be too much trouble to keep?"

Seeming as conflicted as I was, he exhaled a ragged breath. "You're not mine to keep."

And I let my mouth lead before my mind could catch up and hold my tongue. "What if I wanted you to?"

Smiling sadly, he shook his head. "That hex you were hit with must have jostled your brain, otherwise you'd never say such a thing."

"But I am. I—I don't want to leave you, not yet," I admitted in a breathless rush.

"I don't want you to either." He reached for my face, cupping it in slightly shaking hands. "But the only truth I've known my whole life is that what I want for myself doesn't matter, and I want you too much—"

Halting, he withdrew his hands, curling them into fists at his sides, and I felt my heart squeeze like it was in his palm.

"Opona needs you, just like Mondsee needs me. Should we leave Avelina masquerading as you, things will get progressively worse for both our domains, and those within them who need us."

As much as I hated it, he was right. I had let my feelings cloud my judgment. I should be jumping

at this opportunity, rushing out before he could change his mind.

But he wasn't my captor anymore, if he'd ever been. He had become my friend, my champion—and something far more.

And neither of us could afford to be selfish right now.

Stepping back, he left the box in my hands. "We leave within the hour. Wouldn't want to miss ruining the happy occasion."

"Happy occasion—Oh!" I cringed, remembering the conclusion he'd led me to about Siegfried. "They both work fast."

"Devils like them work fast, but I work faster." Dietrich turned to flash me a heavy-hearted if wicked smile as he reached the door. "And I have to say, I've always wanted to crash a wedding."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Crashing" the wedding wasn't the right word for what we were about to do.

After all, one couldn't crash their own wedding, could they?

Under the autumn midday sun, people were swarming the capital to celebrate the union of Prince Siegfried of Lyonesse and Opona's future queen, supposedly myself. But only a select fraction of those could witness the event in the palace gardens.

Unexpected and uninvited, Dietrich and I were among those privileged people.

We materialized onto palace grounds, dressed for the occasion. Dietrich had the hood of his bronze cloak down, its embroidered borders gleaming like his ponytail-bound hair. The dashing formal suit he wore beneath was now totally hidden.

While I wore something I would have never dared to wear before; a flowing, vivid magenta chiffon and organza creation of Dietrich's. I'd insisted on not wearing what I'd left this palace in, for this had been in another life, and that had been another me. The dramatic flair Dietrich had wanted me to achieve wasn't in returning as I had been then, but as I was now.

I would never again bow to court expectations or anyone else's limitations. I was returning here on my own terms, and would install my own rules.

Dismissed as tardy guests, with only a handful of staff casting me confused looks of recognition, we headed inside with no interceptions. One servant even told us to hurry before the ceremony began.

That meant we had arrived just in time.

Dietrich checked around, his resonant voice echoing through the expansive foyer. "Any idea where the ceremony is exactly?"

"Knowing my sister, for maximum significance, it should be in the throne room."

Dietrich held out his elbow and bowed. "Shall we?"

There were so many things I wanted to say to him. Things we hadn't had the chance to discuss, like the kiss we'd shared, and how I wanted to initiate another one, and way more.

Instead, I merely linked my arm with his and took in a deep breath as his transportation spell whipped around us.

The vortex of glimmering gold faded from the center first, presenting me with a focused view of the throne platform, the clarity growing to encompass the rest of the grand room.

Facing each other with the high priest between them, binding their hands with gilded silk, Siegfried and Lina were the picture-perfect prince and princess, styled for their storybook wedding, with her in our grandmother's tiara and ice-blue gown and him in his fur-lined navy cape.

Marching forward, I took off my right satin fuchsia shoe and flung it at her. "I OBJECT!"

Guests joined in a chorus of gasps and the music came to an abrupt halt as the sole of my shoe smacked Lina's right cheek.

The high priest dropped their hands and his jaw, and instead of showing concern, Siegfried stepped back, hand over his mouth to smother his laughter. They were further broken apart when our father pushed between them in his haste to reach me.

Father caught me in a tight hug, decorum thrown to the wind. "Lina, you've come home!"

Overwhelmed, I hugged him back tightly, choking, "I'm Ava."

He pulled back, still holding me. The worry in his eyes warmed my heart, but that it was for Lina raised my temperature to a sizzling degree. And that was before I caught Lina's death glare from over his shoulder.

She was the reason he'd been worried sick. And she didn't even have the decency to look shocked by my presence, just enraged.

"Don't listen to her!" Lina yelled. "She's lying and stirring up trouble like she always does."

"So you admit you're a liar?" I fired back at her. "Would you like to tell the truth, or should I do the honors?"

Fury and anxiety stiffened her, her eyes bulging as they darted around like those of a cornered animal. "Stop it, Lina, stop it."

Still clinging to the act? Fine.

Throwing my arms out, I addressed the whole room at the top of my lungs. "If any of you have noticed a strange shift in behavior in your crown princess, I can now assure you that you weren't seeing things, because she is an imposter!" I took off my other shoe and pointed it at her. "This is Avelina, an envious usurper and morbid liar, who conspired to kill me, her own twin!"

"Father, make her stop!" Lina cried. "She's ruining everything!"

I raised my voice even more, the loudest I'd ever been in public. "I am Princess Aventina! The night of my confirmation ball, my sister organized to have me 'taken care of'—permanently. While she took my place, my role, and the man I had planned to marry."

"A very likely story," Lina sneered, regaining a sickening amount of smug confidence. "You just ran off and realized it was too hard to live outside these walls. Once you were done with your tantrum, you decided to come home and continue disrupting our lives."

"With this amount of dedication to a role, you missed your calling as an actress, Lina," I snapped.

She looked ready to spit venom at me. "Pray tell, if you were 'kidnapped,' how is it you managed to escape?"

Dietrich emerged from the surrounding crowd, hood firmly in place, hiding his identity. "Your insistence on 'finishing the job' you initially hired me for prompted me to return her. Having attempts on my life is not worth the price you paid me to remove the crown princess from you path and ease this ruse for you."

Her face fell as true fear entered her eyes.

Likely recognizing Dietrich in his disguise as the sorcerer contracted to fix the issue with his mistress, Siegfried no longer found humor in this situation, gawking at her. "You lied to me?"

"No, I didn't! Lina always does things like this. One minute she runs off with a pirate, and the next she's back to ruin my wedding day!" she whined, reaching for him. "Let's just finish the ceremony then deal with her."

He retreated like he was burned by her touch, descending the steps towards us. "I don't think so. I came here to marry Aventina, not Avelina."

The way he said it was all the proof I needed that Dietrich had told the truth about him. Not that I needed it. I already believed him, that Siegfried was only here for my crown, no different than Lina herself.

"I'm Aventina!" she screamed, desperation shaking her voice. "Wouldn't you have noticed if I weren't?"

No, he wouldn't have, because he didn't care.

Chasing Siegfried, Lina snatched our father's scepter and ran down the steps. "Don't go near them! They're already bewitching you!"

Siegfried rushed towards me, hands held out in reverence, but all the warmth I had once envisioned in his brown eyes was gone. Now there was nothing but the cold, calculating opportunism reflecting off his pearly smile. "Ava, my dear. You have returned to me. I should have known something was amiss."

Irritation made my gums itch, so the mocking smile I attempted came out more of a snarl. "Well, true love of mine, why didn't you notice?"

"She was very convincing," he exclaimed defensively.

"Really?" I tapped my shoe on my palm warningly. "Have you ever known me to like hunting, or ask for something as terrible as shooting a swan?

His demeanor cracked, unease weighing down his handsome but now off-putting features. "It's been years since I last saw you—perhaps you had changed."

"You spent that evening looking oh-so-adoringly at me, and listening to my voice like it was the sweetest harp—and didn't even notice when it jumped an octave in tone during the same night? *Or that my front teeth had shrunk?*"

He opened his mouth to object.

I closed it for him with the tip of my shoe below his cleft chin. "You didn't want to question any differences because you didn't want to fumble your chances of becoming my consort. It didn't matter which one you got; anyone would have done as long as they funded your lifestyle and reinstated you to the royal life your father rightfully deprived you of!"

A wildfire of whispers spread, filling the room with a judgmental buzz as Siegfried paranoiacally whipped his head around. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Dietrich laughed, blowing out the fiery gossip with his approach, leaving only smoke trails of tension. Then with a theatrical gesture around his head, he made his hood fall back. "Last I checked, the one whose memory I altered wasn't yours, but the man you cuckolded, and only to stop him from killing you."

Siegfried's skin blanched, becoming indistinguishable from the sculptures at the corners of the throne room. "Rothbart—it was you who bewitched Lord…" He gulped, stopped, at a loss for words.

But his reaction was enough, another proof that Dietrich had told the truth about his brother's degenerate character.

Collecting himself swiftly, Siegfried glared at Dietrich. "As I understand, you've already been paid handsomely. So what are you doing here?"

I lived for the vicious spite in Dietrich's grin as he drawled, "Can't a man attend his brother's wedding?"

Anger turned Siegfried's face into the thoughtless, vicious brat that he was, just as it twisted Lina's face into a mirror of her malevolent soul.

She pointed the heavy scepter at Dietrich, its top large and covered in jewels. "You! You're behind this ruse! Is this some form of extortion? You've come to hold my wedding day hostage for a

boon, is that it?"

"Girls, who is this man?" our father asked, only to be drowned out by Lina's furious scream.

"A sorcerer! This entire deception is his plot to defame me. He's the one who took Lina, and now he's come with this imposter, no doubt to replace me with her!"

That made Siegfried regain some of his bravado as he growled, "My mother and her people were right to chase your kind to the edges of society. Whenever we don't bow down to you, you sow discord in our courts."

Dietrich and I shared a look of disdain. These two really were birds of a feather.

Before they could start swaying public opinion in favor of their conspiracy, Dietrich turned to Lina. "How's your leg, *Aventina*?"

She stopped dead in her tracks, frowning. "Is that a threat?"

"It's mere concern. You hurt your leg two years ago, didn't you?"

"What are you—" She bit her tongue before she could finish that sentence, eyes the size of saucers. "Yes, I did. Your point?"

"You seem to be walking fine," I hissed.

"It's been two years. You can't expect me to be limping forever, can you?"

"Mm-hm, and which leg was it that used to hurt you?" I pressed.

Without a second thought, she blurted, "My left."

Her ignorance of even that burned the remains of my patience with this charade.

I flung my remaining shoe at her face at close range. "It's my right leg!"

A sharp crack preceded a scream and blood shooting out her nose.

Oh, how I had long dreamt of giving her an ounce of the pain she'd belittled then caused me. But it hadn't fully cooled my fury as I seethed towards Siegfried, "There, with her nose broken you won't have any trouble telling us apart."

"I can give her a goat's face and end all confusion," Dietrich suggested.

That was when Lina gave up on continuing her act, spitting bloodied saliva at him. "You had one job, to get rid of her and let me have what I deserved. But you just couldn't do it, you incompetent, *soft* excuse for a sorcerer!"

As I marveled at how she'd spat the word "soft" as if it was the ultimate insult, she charged at me, holding the scepter like a club, screeching, "I'll finish the job myself!"

Mid-swing and scream, a golden light encompassed her and bled onto Siegfried, who, instead of shielding me, had ducked to avoid her.

Part of me knew what was happening, but I could only stare slack-jawed as Dietrich's display of power held them in its grip and distorted the shadowy forms within the vortex of light.

It was one thing being on the receiving end of such magic, and another to witness it. And the arresting fascination didn't fade with the light.

Shouts of fear broke me out of my daze, and my first reaction once my shock began to melt was an outburst of full-throated laughter at the sight before me.

Where Lina and Siegfried had stood were now two black swans, honking and flapping their wings in distress.

Dietrich stopped by my side, dusting his palms together. "That's the least they deserve."

I turned to him, laughter rendering me breathless, but the rush of relief and disbelief made me further lightheaded. "That was the last thing I expected to happen."

He smiled at me softly, eyes locked on mine, though a hint of sadness swam in their depths. "I figured you could use a pleasant surprise for once."

I looked around us and found my father frozen in stunned silence, gawking at the swans who used to be his daughter and would-be son-in-law. Over a hundred other pairs of eyes swung between them and us, bathed in the colors of the stained-glass windows. But all I could truly see was him.

Breaths evening out as my hysterical chuckles died down, I felt my chest expand to make room for how my heart swelled for him. "Thank you. It's quite a poetic enchantment."

The tiara Lina had worn flew out from the midst of the honks and feathers and into his hand. "Enchantment? This is a curse, effective until they both learn to be selfless and loving."

Since I'd already crashed a wedding, thrown my shoes at the bride, and aired the groom's scandals, the least undignified thing I could do now was snort smugly. "So, unless they defy their own natures, this curse is as good as permanent."

"Well, swans mate for life, so it'll be interesting to see how their fate fares."

Torn between malicious glee and overwhelming ardor for this man, my cheeks hurt from how hard I smiled at him. "And how much does a curse from the great von Rothbart cost?"

"For you? Nothing." He slipped the tiara on my head with gentle care, hands stroking down the sides of my face as he stepped back. "It's the least I could do to apologize."

At a loss for words, I reached for him. "There's no need. I don't blame you."

"You're too kind. But that doesn't negate all I've done and will do."

I shook my head. "There will be no need for you to do—anything anymore. I have an idea on how we can fix the state of affairs—"

"I can't believe it!" Father's distressed shout cut me off.

Turning, I found him still gaping at the panicking black swans.

"This is the merciful version of the fate she had sentenced me to," I told him in a rush.

Father looked back and forth between us, jaw trembling as realizations filled his eyes. "I should have known. I should have known something was wrong when 'Ava' suddenly started being loud and obnoxious—and able to run."

I darted to his side, reaching for his hands soothingly. "It's not your fault."

He shook his head firmly. "No, I'm a terrible father. I didn't even question the story she gave me about you—*her* running away with a pirate. I sent guards out on a wild goose chase to find the girl that was right under my nose. I should have trusted my gut, confronted her about your—*her* change in character, not just assuming it was the reality and pressure of being confirmed crown princess making you—her—act out."

"Well, it's too late for regrets. I'm back and the truth is out, and that's all that matters. They've already been served their sentence, so I don't have to worry about any more subterfuge for a while, and can have a fresh start on my life as confirmed crown princess." I eagerly reaching behind me for Dietrich's arm. "Speaking of fresh starts, I'd like to formally introduce to you someone who has become so very dear to me."

Father looked over my shoulder. "The sorcerer?"

Still reaching, I smiled. "Yes. I know how this sounds, how sudden it seems, but it'll all make sense when I tell you everything. We also need to have a serious talk about laws regarding sorcery and those who practice it, and the issues from neighboring kingdoms that created the environment Lina exploited not once, but twice to rid herself of me."

"But he's gone."

"What?" I spun around to find nothing but the wide berth the guests had given us.

Dietrich had vanished into thin air.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Despite not being involved in the performance, I was proud all the same of how Mondsee Academy's midwinter play had unfolded.

The students put their hearts and souls into every scene, filling me with nostalgic longing as I watched them sing, dance, and enchant not just their costumes and props, but the audience.

I did have a hand in the turnout, though, the number of nobility and gentry attending the event under a charitable guise. At my subtle and not-so-subtle prodding, they'd grabbed at the excuse to satiate their curiosity about the hub of sorcery, now that it was no longer at the cost of extreme political punishment by half the northern kingdoms.

Between King Ludwig divorcing Queen Corisande and the scandals of their son coming to light, I'd made sure that the best way for Orcage and Lyonesse to maintain good relations with Opona was to let go of what happened to Siegfried, and apologize by indulging me.

It hadn't been immediate or even steady, but the effort to overturn anti-sorcery laws and all the negative sentiments and cruel behavior they normalized was well underway.

Safe to say, that was one of the many reasons it had taken a season for me to return here.

That, and I hadn't known where Mondsee was, despite having once flown from this castle to my own. Finding its location in my human form had taken me a while.

But just as I had, Dietrich had made all my efforts unnecessary. After the anti-magic laws had been revoked, and with his father and other rulers proclaiming a new era of peace between humans and sorcerers, he'd sent out invitations everywhere to attend Mondsee's midwinter performance.

Now, from the royal boxes perched on either side of the theatre, I watched both the show and Dietrich, who sat in the middle of the house seats, watching with the focus of someone here to prevent disasters rather than enjoy the show.

The second the students struck their finale poses, I was up on my feet, clapping and smiling so wide my cheeks ached. In the midst of my enthusiastic cheer, I had nearly slammed my elbow into my cousin Leonid's face and knocked the drink from his sister Yelena's hand.

After a prolonged standing ovation, the curtain dropped and the lights came on, with the students acting as ushers directing people to the afterparty hall.

"Aren't you coming?" Yelena asked, unfurling her dark-blonde hair from its chignon as she descended the steps.

Our resemblance was surface-level, but I had taken great comfort in her presence at court ever

since my return and Lina's sentencing. She was turning out to be the sister I'd always wanted.

"I'll join you in a bit. There's something I need to do first," I said, keeping an eye out for Dietrich, who still stood by the orchestra, talking to a handful of attendees.

Taking my time to descend, clinging to the railing to avoid any accidents, I exited the theatre and hid by the entrance. As I waited, I tried to organize my thoughts, to come up with the best way to greet him.

But once he emerged from the depths of the theatre, bathed in chandelier light, I lost my wits.

In a departure from the loose white shirts and dark cloaks he'd favored during our acquaintance, he wore cream form-fitting pants and shirt, overlaid with a lavender gold-embroidered tunic and cummerbund, and light tan knee-high boots, displaying his powerful if now leaner physique to the best advantage. Since I'd last seen him, he'd also cut his hair. It was short at the back and longer at the front, and his beard was thicker. It all emphasized the nobility of the now sharper planes of his face.

Regardless of his father, Dietrich cut quite the regal figure. He always had.

Emboldened, I stepped out from behind my column. "You never said goodbye."

He stopped, back straighter. Slowly, he turned, eyes wide and mouth half-open, huffing out a quiet "Ava?" as if my name were a prayer.

"You sure ran off quick," I said, reining in my hurt and lacing my tone with humor. "Afraid we were going to toss you in the dungeon for your crimes?"

Blinking in surprise, he threw his head back and laughed. "As if a dungeon could hold me."

"Then what could hold you?" I approached, hands behind my back. "You know, to make sure you don't pull another disappearing act."

Cutting my journey in half, he crossed the distance in longer strides then stopped before me, disbelieving, greedy eyes searching my face and form. "I didn't know you were coming. Your name wasn't on the list."

"I came as Princess Yelena Belova's plus-one, shared the box with her and her brother Leonid. Couldn't risk you finding out and avoiding me."

"Avoiding you? I sent you an invitation."

"Yes, and no further note saying you wished to see me." I took the invitation out of my purse, a firm envelope bearing my title and within it the same details sent to everyone else. "It was quite formal. Too formal for me, after what we've been through."

"I…" He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm sorry. I thought putting distance between us would be for the best."

"Why?"

"I'd already burdened you with my feelings, and I couldn't bear the thought of you being beholden to me in any way."

"Did you forget that I returned your feelings?"

He shook his head. "You were put through serious emotional turmoil from the moment we met until we parted, and no doubt confused by what you felt towards me. I didn't blame you for mistaking gratitude for something stronger."

"The only confusing thing was why my own sister would do this to me, not what I felt towards you."

Remaining resistant, he said, "You despised and distrusted me, and once we parted you must have remembered why you felt that way. I wouldn't blame you."

"It's been over three months, and I still feel the same as I did when you left," I said softly. "Do you?"

Dietrich stared at me, seemingly at a loss.

The longer he took to respond, the sillier I felt. It was best for me to retreat before I could further embarrass myself. "Unless you came to your senses and have found someone else to share your flights with."

"No!" He caught my forearm, stopping me from turning away. "If anything, the time and distance has brightened the light you lit within me, not dimmed it."

"But?"

"But I would be nothing but trouble for you, and I have already played a great hand in your suffering," he said miserably. "But I want you to know I have not since taken on a cruel commission, only neutral jobs. I wouldn't have even if the fortunate dissolution of my father's marriage and the rescinding of the anti-magic laws hasn't returned high society's fascination and dependence on magic to the open. I only wonder why it happened so fast and across so many lands."

I gave him an exaggerated secretive look.

Realization dawned on him, followed by astonishment. "You…you were championing my cause. You're the reason I had people contacting me requesting to attend the students' performance."

I nodded.

"Thank you," he breathed, stroking my arm with his thumb as if he couldn't stop touching me. "This means everything for the school, and opens so many doors for the current crop of students and those who will attend in the future. It's an unprecedented opportunity for my kind in general, to lead peaceful and productive lives out in the open."

"I'm glad to hear it. It's what you all should and will." I stepped closer, heart clanging in my chest. "But what I'd also like to hear is why you claim to care for me, but not enough to be with me."

He winced, his voice dropping to a mere whisper. "Because I can't stifle your prospects or cause you more trouble for my sake. I can't be with you *because* I love you."

Those three words stole the air from my lungs, making me lightheaded. "Oh."

Dietrich seemed apologetic about his confession. "I've done things I'm not proud of to protect this school and the futures of those under my care, but aiding your sister's plan and being your captor…"

"You were my savior!" I interrupted forcefully. "If not for you I wouldn't be alive today, let alone reinstated to my life and status."

"It still doesn't absolve what I did."

"It does and way more," I insisted. "We might have met under unfortunate circumstances, but it turned out to be for the best in every way. It spared me a life married to an unfaithful parasite or one of life-ruining betrayal. But most of all—" I looked at the window to our left. "I got to know what it was like to fly."

"I'm happy I did at least that for you."

"That and gave Lina a fate straight out of the epic ballads," I said with a grin.

A soft laugh emerged in a huff, loosening his rigid posture. "How are the lovebirds?"

"Making rounds in their lake, finally eager to eat the food we give them after foraging for their own meals proved too much effort." I chuckled, remembering the tantrum Lina had thrown when she'd first been presented with a meal of fresh algae and worms. "And they've finally made their peace with the other animals in the area. Fights with actual swans and geese are more trouble than they're worth."

"I never did learn how Lyonesse responded to its former crown prince's disappearance," he mused. "Do they think he ran off with the great pirate Redbeard as well?"

"Well, your father's court and mine know the truth, but as far as anyone else is concerned, he and

Lina ran off together, far away from royal requirements and the stifling life of a prince and princess." I batted my lashes and sighed. "People are even circulating stories of how they rode their runaway carriage into the sunset. How romantic."

He grinned down at me. "I'd spread the story that they went into Faerie, because once there, you're as good as gone." He paused and shook his head. "I can't believe Lyonesse is so indifferent about losing its former heir and later spare, leaving Alberich as my father's sole successor."

"About that." I slipped my arm through his, turning my palm up. After a moment, he hesitantly laced his fingers with mine, and I sighed my pleasure. "What if I said that during my talks with King Ludwig's representatives, I told him I'd forgive Siegfried's manipulation if he agreed to legitimize his eldest?"

A sharp intake of breath was followed by a stumbling exhale. "Why would you do that for me?" Then his jaw tightened. "Not that I need his recognition or anything else from him."

My heart swelled at his well-earned pride, for he truly was the best a man could be on his own.

I leaned closer into him, tightening my hold over his hand. "I know *you* don't need anything from anyone. But it *would* ease your efforts to return magic to influential households and society in general, ensuring the future you want for your students."

His frowned disappeared and the glow of his eyes flared. "You're right. That alone would make involvement with him and his court worth it."

"But—there is a catch."

"Whatever you need done, without anything in return, I'll do it," he promised fervently, smile lines framing his eyes, which now glowed brightly. "I'm forever at your beck and call."

"Forever?"

"Or however long you see fit. I am yours to command, because there is nothing I can give you that will measure up to what you deserve. But for what it's worth, you have my eternal thanks for both forgiving me, and for using your position to help Mondsee and my people," he said in a breathless rush, now holding my hand between both of his, like he had in his quarters the first night we'd bared our souls to one another. "I'll be your personal court magician should you wish it."

It was hard not to grin like a lunatic at that offer, as it was so close to what I wished for. "What about the school? Who'd run it?"

"I can easily make the trip back and forth, and prepare a successor from the faculty later," he said confidently. "Whatever you need, I'll make it work."

"Well, as future queen, I'll be needing a consort," I said, looking up at him through my lashes. "One who supports and understands me, who loves me and not the opportunities and privileges I can afford him, who knows what it is like to care for a people whose well-being depends on him."

Aghast, Dietrich slowly stepped back, raising one hand to point at himself.

I nodded.

"*Me?* Of all people?"

Hands itching to pull him back, I nodded again. "All the people presented to me as options paled in comparison to you. Even without my feelings for you, on a totally cerebral level, no one did, or could ever, compare to you."

Just as his face began to form an expression of overwhelming affection, his features became pinched in confusion. "But, Ava, you're a crown princess. And I'm…I'm not worthy of you."

I struggled with the urge to grab him by the lapels as I said, "I'll be the judge of that."

He shook his head firmly. "It's not just that. I'm a sorcerer. No one would accept this."

"Considering Opona was once a hub of sorcery, it would be a return to form for my heirs to wield

magic," I pointed out, before smiling wickedly. "And I doubt anyone would object to that, at the risk of joining Lina and Siegfried in the lake."

"Even if the magic could be overlooked, my status as the son of a mistress, no matter what my father does now to legitimize me, could spur more trouble, even accusations that I transfigured my half-brother, who you were set to marry, to take his place—proving Corisande and all her supporters right after all these years," he vented, face flushing with agitation at this scenario. "As a future queen, you're expected to marry someone who is, at minimum, a count or a duke!"

"As future queen, I can do what I want!"

This seemed to further distress him. "You can't do this! You could antagonize the anti-sorcery crowd for my sake, and start a movement to usurp you!"

"How are you coming up with such outcomes?"

"Because that's how it is!" he blurted out, sounding torn, almost close to tears. "Men like me don't get to be with women like you. We don't get the princess and the happy ending. We get killed by the prince and become a cautionary tale for anyone who dares to reach beyond their lot in life, let alone dream of winning a love that defines eras."

My blood boiled at everything and everyone who'd led us to this moment, to his agonizing guilt, self-doubt and lack of entitlement.

From now on, I'd make sure he only got the respect and admiration he deserved.

As for his concerns, some were valid, and I'd also make sure none of them came to pass.

I'd start by convincing my father and his advisors that I wasn't bewitched or that Dietrich had a plot to depose or rule through me.

I trusted him. Implicitly. With my life and the lives of everyone in my kingdom.

And now I understood why he'd left me. It seemed Dietrich had decided to break his own heart before I could do it for him. He'd resigned himself that once he'd returned me home, I'd never want to see him again, let alone return his feelings.

Oh, how wrong he was.

But he loved me even more than I'd ever dreamed. Enough to sacrifice his own heart for my peace and prosperity. I could now see it would take more effort to convince him that my happiness, and everything else in my life, depended on having him beside me.

"Again, Dietrich, Opona has always had magic. Its ubiquity just cooled in the past twenty or so years, thanks to Corisande's efforts because of you. It's so fitting you had such a central role in their swift dissolution and her fall from grace." I smiled broadly, buzzing with spite, before refocusing on the vital matter of convincing him. "I'm always thinking how I was healed physically and spiritually by what you've created within these walls, the community and the caring. We all need the benevolent magic you teach to better our lives."

"But Orcage, Arbore and Lyonesse remain largely against magic. Corisande will get her allies to treat Opona terribly if you marry not just any sorcerer, but her former husband's—" He stopped, taking a step back, as if viewing me from another angle, looking stunned. "You…you had Ludwig legitimize me so I could become Alberich's spare…"

"…and be allowed to marry me as a sign of diplomacy between our nations," I finished for him. "I told you there was a catch."

As Dietrich jaw dropped, I barely had a rein on my amusement. Not to mention eagerness. I just wanted to drag him into a kiss and be done with it.

I did pull him back to me as I batted my lashes at him. "You as my consort is the least both you and Ludwig owe me, don't you think? As for Corisande, her countrymen and supporters, they can go

gargle sewer water for all I care."

That snuffed out the last of his weary tension, and he threw his head back and laughed, that smooth joyous baritone of his echoing off the marble and resonating within me, filling my blood with a crackling buzz.

As his laughter wound down, he pressed my hand to his chest. "This has to be the strangest proposal in the history of royal arrangements."

"Could be worse." I pretended to consider alternatives. "I could hold you at sword-point like Empress Dorothea of Campania did to her husband, holding the fate of his city over his head should he refuse."

"Are you threatening to burn down the academy if I refuse your offer?" he asked coyly, brows raised in intrigue.

I pressed my hand harder to his chest, delighting in the ppwerful gallop of his heart against my palm, in tandem with my own haywire heartbeat. "I can threaten worse, if it would ease your guilt for your immoral commissions and turning my life upside down."

"Go ahead, do your worst," he drawled, his eyes glowing seductively.

I cleared my throat then put on a stern face. "Dietrich Morgenstern, you will give me your hand or I will cut it off myself, and use your bones as the pyre for this castle."

Never had anyone looked so pleased in the face of such a gruesome threat.

Dietrich's gaze all but melted with adoration as he crooned, "How can I say no to that? No man who ever existed could have had such grisly eagerness for his hand."

Then sparing me the jump to my tiptoes, he swooped down and kissed me.

Pulling back just enough to rest our foreheads together, he gave me both his magic-wielding hands to squeeze and declared, "Aventina Lebedeva, you have my hand, and the rest of me for your pleasure and at your mercy, in exchange for whatever you see fit to bestow upon me."

Chest overcrowding with gratitude and elation, making me feel weightless and infallible, like I could do pirouettes down the stairs and among the stars, I sighed contentedly. "Aside from the title of prince? I have nothing to give now but the first order you'll undertake as my betrothed."

He had moved far enough back for me to see the curiosity literally crackle a blue flame in his gaze. "Anything."

"Since I can't turn you into an owl and stuff you in a bag for payback, you can do that yourself." I looked back to the window, at the slow parting of the thick clouds outlined by the moon they hid. "While you're at it, you can give me back my wings."

With a toss of his hand, the window opened inward, letting the cool night air in. "Fancy a quick flight before we have to join my guests?"

I stepped back into second position, legs and heels together and arms out, anticipation making it hard to remain still. "Do you really have to ask?"

"Admit it, you're just marrying me for my powers," he teased.

"A small price to pay for the control of a kingdom, you evil despotic sorcerer, you."

Chuckling, he fired up his hands. "We're going to cause your courtiers a lot of stress if we keep talking like this."

"Have to keep them on their toes, considering I can't do too much of that myself anymore."

"Guess you could say we're going to ruffle some feathers."

Snorting a laugh at his ready response to my pun, I couldn't help but revel in the unrestrained emotions I now allowed myself to feel.

I caught him, dragging him down to me for a long, deep kiss, murmuring against his warm lips, "I

love you. With everything that I am. Always."

He deepened the kiss. "And I love you. With my every spark of life and magic. Forever."

Finally stepping back, his fingers crackled with magic, and his golden rays started whipping around me. I relaxed into the transformation and began to turn on my left foot. By the time I finished my spin, landing back where I'd started, my arms had become wings.

Dietrich had quickly shifted into his preferred avian form, too, his massive wings gleaming in the moonlight. "Ready to dance in the air again?"

Giddy with delight, I leaped out the window, caution thrown to the wind blowing through my feathers and hair. He followed me with a whoop.

As he climbed to soar alongside me, he shouted, "Look at you! It's like you haven't missed a day since the last time we did this."

I spun sideways, over and over before righting myself. "Because I've been counting down the days until I could do this again. The only thing that could tide me over was closing my eyes and remembering."

"And now you'll never have to do that again. The sky is yours whenever you wish it."

Beaming brighter than the firelit windows of the castle, which grew smaller as we flew higher, I turned my gaze up. "How far do you reckon we can fly this time?"

"As far as you want to reach."

I turned and flapped my wings, giggling, "Race you to the moon!"

As the clouds parted again to unleash the light of the full moon, we flew towards it and our future, setting a scene that would birth a new genre of folk-tales. One where the hero and villain, destined to either be defeated or die at the other's hands, instead wrote a new ending together.

Here, under the twinkling stars and above the glimmering lake, our expected tragic fates had been undone by an unlikely and unforeseen connection. By our love. A love spawned by magic, and made for the skies.

THE END

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you've enjoyed reading THE SORCERER AND THE SWAN PRINCESS as much as I did writing it!

Reviews and word of mouth are the life-blood of Indie Authors, so if you enjoyed the book, please help me spread the word!

Even a line on Amazon, Goodreads and Bookbub would be vital to my success and to the book's sales, and would be hugely appreciated.

If you haven't yet, please check out my first series, FAIRYTALES OF FOLKSHORE. And, if you want more villain-romance, the rest of A VILLAIN'S EVER AFTER.

Stay tuned for Cora's Hades & Persephone trilogy, *Into the Nether Court*!

To find out when it's out, and other exclusive content, news, updates and offers, please sign up to my VIP Mailing List.

I also love to hear from my readers, so please contact me at lucytempestauthor@gmail.com

Thank you for reading!

Lucy

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

— People

Avelina: Ah-veh-lee-nah
Aventina: Ah-ven-tee-nah
Corisande: Coh-ree-sahn-day
Dietrich: Dee-trik
Imelda: Ee-mell-duh
Ludwig: Lood-vigg
Siegfried: Seeg-freed

— Places:

Avongart: Aa-vohn-gaarte
Lyonesse: Lee-yoh-ness
Opona: Oh-poh-nah

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With one foot in reality and the other one lodged firmly in fantasy, Lucy Tempest has been spinning tales since she learned how to speak.

Now, as an author, people can experience the worlds she creates for themselves.

Lucy lives in Florida with her family and two spoiled cats, who would make terrible familiars.

Sign up to her VIP Mailing List

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Princess of Midnight

Dreamer of Briarfell

The Faerie Prince

A VILLAIN'S EVER AFTER:

The Sorcerer and the Swan Princess